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## **SPAIN: CATALAN SEPARATISTS' TRIAL BEGINS AMID TENSIONS**

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Nine of the 12 Catalan separatist leaders are facing charges of rebellion for their role in a failed independence bid in 2017. Former Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont, who led the campaign, is not among the defendants.

The trial of 12 Catalan secessionist leaders involved in an attempt to secede from Spain gets underway in the country's Supreme Court on Tuesday.

The trial has re-ignited tensions over the future of Catalonia. Hundreds of police, including from anti-terrorism units, have been deployed around the Court building in Madrid.

Catalonia declared independence from Spain in October 2017 following a referendum that had been carried out in defiance of a court ban. The declaration sparked Spain's worst political crisis since the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

### **Serious charges**

The defendants are facing charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds, charges which carry a jail term of up to 25 years.

Nine of the accused have been jailed without bail since late 2017 and early 2018, including former Catalan vice president and regional economy minister Oriol Junqueras and former speaker of the Catalan regional parliament Carme Forcadell, who read out the declaration of independence in the assembly.

Former Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont, who fled to Belgium days after the independence declaration, is not among the defendants. Spain does not try suspects in absentia for major offences.

### **'Politically motivated' trial**

Catalan separatists have rejected the trial as a politically motivated "farce."

"The world is looking at Madrid ... what they want is not to judge but to condemn on political reasons," Olivier Peter, a lawyer for one of the accused, told reporters on Monday.

Pro-independence Catalan leader Quim Torra, who will attend the opening session of the trial, called for the acquittal of the defendants.

Secessionists have called on Catalans to briefly stop work at midday on Tuesday in protest against the trial, and to join a rally in Barcelona in the evening. Another major demonstration is planned for the weekend.

The trial is expected to last three months, with the verdicts delivered several months later.

ap/jm (AFP, Reuters, dpa)

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As the world watched, Catalonia's parliament voted 70 to 10 for the region to declare its independence from Spain. "Our legitimate parliament has taken a very important step. This is the people's mandate," Puigdemont said after the decision. Dozens of opposition lawmakers from the Socialist Party, Citizens Party and Popular Party had walked out of the parliament chamber to boycott the vote.

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Kaynak/Source: