

New Governments in Both Spain and Catalonia: Will the Impasse Persist?

By [Richard Fidler](#) and [Iolanda Fresnillo](#)

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Introduction by Richard Fidler

On June 1, less than three weeks after a new government was finally allowed to take office in Catalonia,¹ the Spanish government of [Mariano Rajoy](#)'s People's Party (PP) – which had headed the central state's harsh repression of Catalan self-determination – was defeated in a parliamentary no-confidence vote prompted by a High Court conviction of leading PP officials in a public contracts corruption case.

The vote, initiated by the Spanish social-democratic PSOE, was supported by the left party Unidos Podemos and Catalan and Basque nationalist parties in the Spanish parliament. PSOE federal secretary [Pedro Sánchez](#) became Spain's new prime minister.²

These events open a new phase in the Spanish state's ongoing institutional, social-economic and national-territorial crises, and present the left forces in both Catalonia and Spain with some major challenges.

New Relations?

It remains to be seen whether relations with Catalonia will improve under the new government in Madrid. Sánchez had aligned his party firmly behind Rajoy's opposition to the October 1 independence referendum and in support of the trusteeship imposed on Catalonia under Article 155 of the 1978 Spanish constitution. However, to win Catalan nationalist parties' support for its no-confidence motion, the PSOE promised to establish normal relations with the new Catalan government and undertook to revisit Catalan laws blocked by the Constitutional Court on appeal from the Rajoy government.³

Image on the right: Mariano Rajoy



At minimum, these promises, if effected, would require the withdrawal of charges against the jailed and exiled Catalan leaders and an end to the Madrid government's control over the Catalan government's economic policy although the PSOE has not indicated any such intention. The PSOE has now promised to implement Rajoy's austerity budget, which it had voted against just days before its no-confidence motion. And although the Article 155 trusteeship formally ended with the investiture of the new Catalan government, more than 100 political activists, most of them associated with the grassroots [Committees to Defend the Republic](#) (CDRs), were arrested during the last two weeks of May. Some face charges of "terrorism" because of their role in organizing peaceful protests against the repression.⁴

Spain's left party [Unidos Podemos](#) (UP) can play an important role in the period ahead, both within the parliament (71 seats vs. the PSOE's 85) and "in the streets." However, it will have to resist UP leader Pablo Iglesias' offer to join the government. "This orientation," writes Dick Nichols, the Barcelona-based correspondent of *Green Left Weekly*, "runs the risk of making Unidos Podemos co-responsible for retrograde policies that the PSOE won't abandon, especially in regards to not taxing the rich and big business and abiding by obligations to meet European Commission spending limits.

"A more fruitful approach, as already flagged by the Podemos tendency Anticapitalists, would be to adopt the 'Portuguese approach' of that country's Left Bloc and Communist Party: to support all progressive initiatives of the ruling Socialists while fighting for other progressive measures that they are avoiding and mobilizing the people in support of them - all the while defending the government from the attacks of the right."⁵

In the following article, a leader of the Catalan independence movement outlines a strategy for carrying forward the struggle in the months ahead around actions aimed at building popular support for a project of "radical transformation, emancipation and popular empowerment."

Readers who are aware of the debate in Quebec over the mandate to be given that nation's proposed constituent assembly⁶ may be surprised at Iolanda Fresnillo's insistence that the Catalan assembly initiated by the pro-independence forces should invite and encourage the participation of "those that do not share the preference for independence." She points to the fact that there are many working people in Catalonia who have not been attracted by the republican project associated with the pro-austerity capitalist parties that dominate the present independence movement. Many of them have immigrated with their families in recent years from other parts of the Spanish state and elsewhere in search of jobs and better living conditions. In fact, the native Catalan population now forms just less than one half of the autonomous territory's population.

Fresnillo is convinced that many of these people can be won to support a progressive and inclusive Republican project in the course of a democratic debate open to the widest number. What is key to this process is that the population continues to mobilize *en masse* for the release of the prisoners and an end to the repression, and finds new ways to build "strategies of social transformation" starting, perhaps, at the local or municipal level. And as the recent arrests of CDR activists indicate, the central state's opposition to these mass democratic manifestations - if countered with effective defensive struggles - can convince

many more in the course of these experiences to support an emancipatory democratic Republic as an alternative social and political project.

Richard Fidler is an Ottawa activist who blogs at [Life on the Left](#) – with a special emphasis on the Quebec national question, indigenous peoples, Latin American solidarity, and the socialist movement and its history.

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Five Challenges the pro-independence Left will have to confront, now that we have a Government

by Iolanda Fresnillo

Image below: Carles Puigdemont



With the investiture of Quim Torra as the 131st president of the Generalitat, Catalonia's government, a new phase of the process has begun. Not the final or definitive one, simply a new phase. A phase full of uncertainties and glitches that are impossible to foresee – not just how the legislature will act and for how long, but also what will happen next week. The legal prosecutions still under way (and those that will probably ensue) and the likely sentencing of the political prisoners to jail terms; the constant threat of a new 155 and the expected prohibition by the Constitutional Court of such proposals as the initiation of the Constituent Process or the recovery of suspended laws; the foreseeable tension between the CUP and the Government within the pro-independence bloc, given the evident ideological distance between the president and the CUPistas; the influence, or the interference, that the Council of the Republic or President Puigdemont may exercise over Torra and the Generalitat government... these are some of the obstacles that will have to be overcome if the new president is not to be derailed.

Some of the challenges we confront in this new phase are of special relevance for the left activists we have opted for the sovereigntist process as offering the possibility of radical transformation, emancipation and popular empowerment. The first of those challenges will no doubt be to provide ourselves with spaces in which to construct future strategies that allow us to make reality what now appears as simply a “mantra”: to make a Republic. Right now, thinking of challenges, I will identify five that are, in my opinion, central.

1. Tackle the Exceptional Nature of the Repression

Without a doubt, one of the central issues is how we tackle the climate of repression and deprivation of rights and freedoms that the Spanish state has imposed. The strategy of threats and fears deployed by the Spanish government means it has to make those threats effective and – independently of what the Criminal Code says – keep the political prisoners in prison. We will have to develop strategies gauged to the needs of the prisoners, those in exile and those under siege from the Spanish judicial authorities for having defended the Republic in the streets. The message in the hundreds of thousands of letters and visits and other demonstrations of support must be loud and clear: We have not forgotten you.

Jesús Rodríguez said a few days ago in *Crític* that October 1 has meant a transformation in the values and mentality of many Catalans, in that the experience of recent months has already helped to build “a society that is more critical, more willing to take risks, more open to new forms of understanding the economy and social relations.” This increased predisposition to risk will encounter a foreseeable rise in the incessant repression deployed by the Spanish state and accordingly a growing number of reprisals. Being attentive to this means building spaces and collective strategies to confront that repression, but also spaces that will help us maintain the predisposition to risk, and not to become entangled in the web of fear. It is only through collective action that we can avert the Spanish state’s attempt to paralyze this process of social empowerment. Thus it will be essential to protect spaces like the CDRs that cultivate this collectivity.

And finally, to confront the repression not only through the necessary solidarity actions but also through the construction of strategies of social disapproval. In this respect, to find a way around the lack of demonstrations of solidarity and indignation by a part of the Spanish, European and international left. The left, traditionally internationalist, will have to redouble efforts to explain to the outside world what is happening in Catalonia.

2. Build an Inclusive Republic

Half a year ago we met with a group of left-wing activists from various political spaces and social movements with a proposal to promote the Republic from below and in a form that was not subordinate to the institutional agendas. We issued an appeal to meet, think about and organize ourselves around the theme “Contra la foscor, la llum: el millor del nou i el poder popular. Aixequem la República!” [“Against the darkness, light: the best of the new and the popular power. Stand up for the Republic!”] In this initial meeting, which took place on December 1, 2017, we stated: “The Republic we want is inclusive, democratic, egalitarian, feminist, antiracist and puts a dignified life for all at the center of any politics.”

The proposal of inclusive sovereigntism necessarily clashes frontally with identitarian nationalisms. Against the controversial tweets and articles of President Quim Torra, far from downplaying his words (which we view very seriously) we must reaffirm ourselves in the words that would have to accompany this construction of an inclusive Republic. Not to convince (being inclusive in order to broaden the bases of sovereignty), but because it is correct. Because, if it is not with everyone and for everyone – weaving, not unravelling – it is not our Republic.

An inclusive Republic is at the antipodes of a racist society that undervalues the 15% of the population composed of migrant individuals who, in today’s Catalonia (in the Spanish state and in the European Union) find their rights as citizens denied. An inclusive Republic cannot

be built around an essentialist proposal of Catalan identity; instead, it must celebrate our diversity. Nor can it be a

“neoliberal Republic at the service of the new and old elites, or a new country with the old classes, injustices and privileges as usual. It cannot continue to be subordinate to the interests of capital, super-state structures and actors not chosen democratically and holding decisive powers over our lives. Nor can we allow ourselves to perpetuate a society in connivance with predatory exploitation of the territory, racism and male chauvinism,”

as we stated in the opening ceremony of Aixequem la República.

In this sense, as the independentist lefts, both within and without the Parliament, we have to develop a frontal opposition to the neoliberal policies that the new Catalan government may be tempted to implement, and to any attempt to impose an identitarian Catalanism. And we will have to build strategies that make no concession to the blackmail of those who will doubtless, faced with this opposition, put in question our commitment to the republican project.

3. The Temptation of the Municipal Elections

No one can tell whether the new Government will still be intact by May of next year. But in any case the election date of May 2019, which applies to the municipal and European elections (and to the Balearic Islands, Valencia and other autonomous communities throughout the state), can become an important turning point.

The new municipalism that exploded with the May 2015 elections has highlighted the potential to build emancipatory realities and transformative processes from the local level. The experiences in the city councils led by new forces and left political coalitions in cities like Barcelona, Badalona or Sabadell, but also in smaller cities and towns, are showing us that at the local level it is possible to deploy quite strong strategies of social transformation. And even in some municipalities where the right governs, civil society and the leftist opposition find it easier to initiate transformative initiatives like municipal ownership of services, experiences of direct democracy, or policies of transparency (public hearings). These are processes of transformation and construction of spaces of popular sovereignty that follow rhythms and routes that differ from those in the country's sovereigntist process. I think we have to maintain those different rhythms and routes.

For some time now we have seen how there is a desire among various pro-sovereignty political forces to put the independentist process at the center of the pre-campaigning for the next municipal elections. Proposals like those of Jordi Graupera to present an independentist candidacy for the Barcelona city council have and no doubt will continue to have their reflection in other municipalities. Personally, I think it is a strategic error to try to confine the transformative potential of municipalism within the independentist proposal.

The left must be conscious that the process of building a new country, an inclusive Republic, is a long process that involves a change in hegemonies, as well as transformations in the “macro” but also in the “micro.” Municipalism is a fertile terrain for those transformations, for the construction of sovereignties, that can be the basis for the construction of Sovereignty as a country. Food sovereignties, energy sovereignties, residential sovereignties, health sovereignties, cultural sovereignties, productive sovereignties,

reproductive sovereignties, etc. that can develop in the municipal environment without awaiting the winning of full Sovereignty nationally. So I do not share the hypothesis of some that without an effective Catalan Republic there can be no advance in transformation at the level of municipal government. There is some latitude, and I think that making the exploitation of that latitude await the unlikely achievement of the Republic in the short term is a strategic error.

We have to promote the idea that municipal action is the basis on which to build a new model relationship with the territory and between the territories. And for that we must leave some room for this construction of sovereignties to break independently from the path, rhythm and road map taken by the national process. A strategy that is favourable to the view that sovereignties can emerge as well in municipal governments that are not pro-independence. It seems obvious to me that the coalition between the Commons, ERC and the CUP in cities like Barcelona can generate spaces of transformation that are much stronger than an independentist coalition with the PdeCat. Putting independentism at the center of the next municipal elections would radically break with this transformative potential.

4. Guarantee the Constituent Process

Quim Torra emphasized in his investiture speeches the proposal to move ahead with a Constituent Process that culminates in the drafting of a new Catalan constitution. In this respect, Carles Riera has warned that “a Constituent Process cannot be a workshop for bumper stickers.” How the Constituent Process develops and what it will end up being will have to be one of the lefts’ concerns, not only in the institutions (and this is not simply a concern of the CUP) but also in the social movements, including those that do not share the preference for independence. The potential for a change of hegemonies through a Constituent Process should not be disdained by anyone who is fighting for a transformation and for social, political and economic justice.

“The new republican, self-organized reality that has appeared since October 1 around the CDRs and other spaces with a local base, should form part of the matrix of the Constituent Process.”

From the standpoint of the social movements and left political forces we cannot spoil the possibility of carrying out a Constituent Process that actually allows us to debate everything, to change everything. In this sense, the new republican, self-organized reality that has appeared since October 1 around the CDRs and other spaces with a local base, should form part of the matrix of the Constituent Process. A process that we want to be led from below by the people, distributed throughout the territory, in a non-exclusive way with the democratic guarantee of equality for everyone. This means that the “lobbies” represented by academic experts cannot take precedence over citizenship. And that no one can be excluded from citizenship. Immigrants (with or without papers) have to be able to be part of the process, with voice and vote. Adults but also young people and children. No one can be excluded because of his or her origin, culture, religion, age, gender or political alignment. If we want to make a country for everyone, we have to look to everyone to make it.

The Constituent Process will no doubt also be the focus of the state’s repressive violence. Faced with this obvious risk, the self-organized people will be predisposed to defend the process, as we defended the ballot boxes on October 1. It is more than a defense of the

institutional process as proposed by the Government or Parliament. We will have to be prepared to defend the underlying process, which enables us to advance in the construction of new material aspects, those that make the Republic possible. And we have to be conscious that for a process with these characteristics the worst partners are the over-hasty. We are looking to the future with broadmindedness and we are dealing with a Constituent Process with guarantees, which is another way of saying that we must take the necessary time.

5. Making the Republic Without Undue Haste

For many of us, the Republic is not simply a legal form, the constitution of new borders. The Republic is not built law by law, but by making a reality of republican spaces and materialities. The Republic is not a state but a process of transformation that results in a new, and better, country. A long process that, once again, needs time in which to build the Republic carefully, for ourselves and for the territory. To form a WE that includes the convinced, but also those who are not, takes time. To deploy and reaffirm sovereignties takes time. To construct not only a new country but a better country in which full sovereignty is exercised, from below, takes a lot of time.

Let us give ourselves that time, with strategies that are far-sighted and with infinite patience, so that the [process of building the Republic](#) can effectively put life, care and social justice at the center. This is the biggest challenge we confront on the left if we do not want to deny the fact that making the Republic means generating a genuinely emancipative process and that the results will be a country of social justice. The overhasty may be able to ensure that the new country arrives earlier (although there is no guarantee of that), but it will not be the country that we want. Let us give ourselves not only enough space but also time to meet, think, organize and build - together - the Republic.

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Iolanda Fresnillo is an activist in social movements in the local, state and international campaigns on development finance, debt, human rights, the environment, peace, commerce and responsible consumption. She tweets at [@ifresnillo](#).

Notes

1. See "[‘Racist’ Catalan president vows to build republic as Spain vetoes ministers.](#)"
2. See "[Spanish state: How and why the Rajoy government fell.](#)"
3. Ibid.
4. See "[Article 155 in Catalonia: Spain’s new laws turn peaceful protesters into terrorists.](#)"
5. See "[Spanish state: How and why the Rajoy government fell.](#)"
6. See, for example, "[Québec solidaire clarifies its support for independence but new debates lie ahead.](#)"

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