

Divided It Falls: The Crisis in Catalonia Has Opened Up Old Wounds That Will Take Generations to Heal.

It was in 1960, aged seven, that I was introduced to Catalonia. At the invitation of my recently widowed Spanish grandmother, the Burns family found itself living in the beautiful medieval fishing village of Sant Feliu de Guixols, named after a 10th-century Benedictine monastery. It would turn out to be our Costa Brava holiday home for the next six years.



I discovered that Catalonia was one of the most alluring regions of Spain, with a distinct cultural identity that had endured, despite General Franco's best efforts to destroy it. My young friends in the village switched effortlessly between Spanish and Catalan. They taught me how to dance the sardana. They supported FC Barcelona with a passion and loyalty that went beyond an admiration for the flowing, attacking football that was its trademark. I became a devoted fan.

In the background lingered tragic memories of the Spanish Civil War, which both my English father and my Spanish mother had experienced, its brutality and intolerance never more manifest than in Catalonia, where radical supporters of the Spanish republic had murdered Spanish priests and nuns and thousands of others opposed to their cause, and Franco had responded with the mass execution of what he called his Catalan "enemies".

It seemed that peace had been made with this brutal past when, in October 1977, the exiled Catalan President Josep Tarradellas returned to Barcelona to head up the first regional government, two years after the death of Franco. Tarradellas' return, agreed with the Spanish crown and the government in Madrid, symbolised the extraordinary spirit of dialogue and reconciliation that characterised Spain's transition to democracy after nearly 40 years of dictatorship.

In that same year I returned to Catalonia as a young journalist. I will never forget the wonderful sense of citizenship that flowered, and the way Catalans led post-Franco Spain's embrace of democracy. Barcelona became a thriving centre for some of the best writers, journalists and artists in the Spanish-speaking world, and attracted an immigrant workforce from around Spain and South America that felt welcome, even if they often persisted in speaking Spanish rather than Catalan.

Over the years that followed Catalonia flourished as an autonomous region of Spain, with the Catalan language taught alongside Spanish in every local school, with its own public services and a regional police force, and with some of the biggest business corporations in Spain headquartered in Barcelona.

And yet today Catalonia is, as the writer Juan Gabriel Vásquez put it in the Spanish daily El País last week, “a society in conflict, not just against the ghost it calls Spain, but with itself: a divided society in which each side has lost trust in the other, a tense society that has allowed its politicians to shatter its coexistence”.

While the crisis may have taken most of the world by surprise, those of us who know the region have experienced the events of recent weeks as the latest depressing chapter in a story that has been unfolding for several years. Had there been statesmen in Madrid or Barcelona with the imagination to negotiate a political settlement, the present situation could have been avoided. The separatists deepened the crisis by their unilateral declaration of independence last week, the latest move in an increasingly uncompromising strategy that has included the rejection of the authority of the King of Spain and of the Spanish parliament.

In recent years an increasingly radicalised Catalan nationalism has taken hold of local politics, education and media. It reflects the views of about half the Catalan electorate, who resent Madrid’s refusal to recognise their right to vote in a Scottish-style independence referendum. Other Catalans, perhaps half, feel comfortably Spanish as well as comfortably Catalan, and are appalled by the prospect of independence.

Though youthful demonstrators euphorically waving Catalan independence flags trade on emotional memories of Franco’s repression and talk of the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) as a “day of liberation”, Spain is not a dictatorship. It has had 40 years of democracy. The use of force by police during the unlawful but peaceful independence referendum on 1 October was disproportionate and disturbing, but Spaniards live under the rule of law. The UDI was a violation of parliamentary legality and Catalonia’s own statute of autonomy, and defied not just the democratically elected government of Spain but all the major opposition parties, and the European Union.

Far from being a heroic democratic gesture, it reeks of the kind of populist nationalism that in the past has divided Europe and provoked civil wars. It is also an act of self-delusion. Catalonia lacks the currency, the business support, security apparatus or the international endorsement to be economically successful; meanwhile, the campaign of “passive resistance” to Madrid risks turning violent, as the central government moves to depose its leaders.

The phrase “direct rule” has, of course, a certain resonance for British and Irish readers, with memories of the Westminster government sending in the army to try to restore law and order in Northern Ireland early in the Troubles. Its use to describe the next stage of the Catalan crisis may be convenient shorthand but it is not a phrase the Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy has opted to use.

He talks of “Article 155”, enshrined in Spain’s democratic constitution, and approved by all the major opposition parties over four decades ago. It gives the Spanish government the right to take the necessary measures to restore a wayward autonomous government to lawful conduct. This will be the first time Article 155 has been invoked; it is broadly framed, and gives the central government considerable flexibility to go in as hard or as soft as it chooses, once it has secured majority support in Spain’s upper house, or Senate.

Beyond resurrecting memories of the lead up to the civil war, when Catalonia’s previous UDI led to

military confrontation with Madrid, the government is entering uncharted territory which, apart from any legal challenges, is a potential political minefield. By contrast, the decision by Rajoy to call early regional elections, allowing all Catalans the opportunity of a lawful vote on their future, might help to defuse tensions, while opening up the possibility that a majority of Catalans will vote in a less confrontational parliament and a new regional government.

Such a reconciliation would be welcomed by most clergy in Catalonia. A small number of individual bishops and a minority of priests in the region have spoken out in support of the nationalist cause, but there is widespread support in the Church for free and open lawful elections. My own local priest in the Catalan town of Sitges, where I have a home, Father Josep, has been praying every Sunday with his congregation in Catalan and Spanish for dialogue and respect for the common good, keenly aware that both have been thin on the ground in recent weeks.

The bitterness towards the rest of Spain felt by my separatist neighbours is becoming deeper. Their anger and resentment is mirrored by the virulent anti-Catalanism of unionists I know elsewhere in Spain. It gives me great pain to watch as the pluralist, tolerant, hospitable, creative society that Catalonia had become is being destroyed – from within and from without. It is a heartbreaking tragedy for Catalonia, for Spain, and for Europe. A “silent majority” of Catalans, proud of their culture but wanting to remain part of Spain and of the EU, is caught in the crossfire. Whatever the outcome of the current crisis, deep wounds have been opened up that will take another generation to heal.

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