Catalonia's Quest for Independence

Posted on Monday 10th December 2012

The Catalan secessionist debate can be considered as the resurgence of a long-standing desire by Catalans to assert their national identity by the establishment of a distinct Catalan nation in which their economy, language and culture would not be centrally determined.

During the 1939–1975 dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, national unity and the legitimisation of the Franco dictatorship was predicated on a homogeneous Castilian identity, which was brutally enforced by the repression of all regional differences, one of which was Catalan culture and language.

The 1975 transition to democracy pledged to create a “Spain of the autonomies”, and accordingly, legislation was ratified to reverse the stagnation of Catalan culture and language. The advent of the economic recession, however, has caused Catalans to criticise a federal fiscal system which, they allege, has enabled the Spanish state to accrue far more financial benefits from Catalonia than the Catalans themselves. Their grievances are not entirely unfounded: Catalonia is Spain’s richest and most industrialised region, accounting for one fifth of Spain’s GDP, and its taxes help finance less prosperous regions, such as Andalucía. For many Catalans, this unequal distribution of wealth has become intolerable in the context of a severe recession in Catalonia, where unemployment now stands at 16.5%.

Compounding the dire economic situation is the indebtedness of the region: it has the highest level of debt in Spain, owing approximately €42 billion. In 2012, the president of the Catalan generalitat, Mr. Artur Mas’s, repeated attempts to renegotiate a more favourable fiscal arrangement, including an increase in central funding to the region, were unsuccessful.

The September 12th protests, which congregated 1.5 million people on the streets of Barcelona, were the catalyst for Mas’s convoking of early elections to debate the issue of separation. The disappointing outcome of the 25th November elections, in which Mas’s party Convergencia i Unio lost 12 seats, suggests that Mr. Mas and his fellow politicians may have misinterpreted the extent of popular support for their party, not separation per se. Hence, the PP’s (Spanish Conservative Party) glee at the election results, which have allowed them to deride Mas as “ridiculous” and to claim that there is no need to hold a referendum on Catalan independence, is both hubristic and erroneous.

Catalans elected almost two-thirds of the 135-seat local parliament to four different separatist parties that all want to hold a referendum on secession from Spain, a result that confirms the widespread popular support for independence as well as public anger at the austerity measures imposed by Mas.

In the lead-up to the elections, the public image of Convergencia i Unio was tarnished by the central government’s vilification of Mr Mas and his fellow politicians, who were not only inveighed against as “anti-Spanish”, but also revealed to have secret Swiss bank accounts by the right-wing newspaper, *El mundo*. The excoriation of Catalan independents in right-wing television channels, such as Intereconomía, was reminiscent of the worst propaganda of the Francoist era: commentators’ diatribes illustrated how the antagonism between centripedal and centrifugal forces simmers under the surface of Spanish life, as well as the intransigence of the monolithic Francoist model of nationhood. Financial probity aside, Mr. Mas’s strategy of conjoining Catalan independence and EU membership also backfired, as EU Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, was decidedly lukewarm about the possibility of a Catalan accession to the EU.

Interestingly, the debate on an independent Scotland was held as an aspirational secessionist paragon for Catalan nationalists, because like Catalonia, the Scottish independence movement is rather pragmatically focused on the optimisation of territorial resources, such as the North Sea oil, and control over their own taxes. However, due to the long-standing British democratic tradition which respected its constituent parts, the proponents of Scottish independence are not as inflected with the same deep-seated sense of historical victimhood as their Catalan counterparts, many of whom personally experienced the full brunt of Francoist repression.

Faced with the prospect of being cast adrift, many prominent Catalan businessmen began to express their concerns about the effect of separation on trading relations with Spain, creating further doubt in the minds of a public bombarded by media allegations that the separation issue amounted to nothing more than a diversionary tactic. As the other three parties that were elected combined their separatist agenda with a sound economic programme, Mas’s over-prioritisation of the separatist issue and inattention to economic issues substantiated media allegations, proving detrimental to his party’s standing. Significantly, Mas came to power in 2010 with the promise of obtaining a more propitious fiscal pact for Catalonia, modelled on the one currently enjoyed by the Basque country, whereby it would collect its own taxes and pay a certain amount to the central government for public services. In contrast to parties such as the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), who have long propounded the need for independence, the fervency of Mas’s commitment only became noticeable in the wake of the September protests. Hence, many have dismissed his independence campaign as political opportunism. Mas’s independence strategy has been exposed as shoddy and poorly formulated, and Catalan voters are clearly unconvinced of his suitability to implement such an immense remit. The mandate for independence from the Catalan people is undeniable, but the enactment, in regard to leadership and the reconfiguration of relations with Spain and the EU, remains unclear. In my opinion, it will require a leader, who envisages Catalan independence as a gradual process, and who also possesses more charisma and vision than Mr. Mas, to lead Catalonia to nationhood.

Dr Lorraine Ryan is a Birmingham Fellow in the Department of Modern Languages: Hispanic Studies, at the University of Birmingham.

© University of Birmingham 2014