



Extract of International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine

<http://app.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4253>

Catalonia

# 27S: an earthquake that doesn't stop here

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV489 - October 2015 -

Publication date: Tuesday 13 October 2015

## **Description:**

The Catalan parliamentary elections of September 27, 2015 confirmed the slow motion earthquake that has shaken Catalan society in the past four years, buffeted by the policies of austerity and the explosion of 15M at first, and by the independence movement afterwards. The system of traditional parties has broken up. And from the polls a roadmap emerges that shows that what is to come will be equal to or more profound than what has already happened.

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**The Catalan parliamentary elections of September 27, 2015 confirmed the slow motion earthquake that has shaken Catalan society in the past four years, buffeted by the policies of austerity and the explosion of 15M at first, and by the independence movement afterwards. The system of traditional parties has broken up. And from the polls a roadmap emerges that shows that what is to come will be equal to or more profound than what has already happened.**

## **Junts pel sí, refoundation of Convergència and unitary aspirations**

Junts pel Sí achieved a good result, 1,616,962 votes (39.6%) and 62 deputies (although less than the sum of CiU and ERC in 2012: 1,614,383, 44.4% and 72 deputies), enough to constitute the clearly dominant force on the Catalan political landscape. In percentage terms its result is slightly higher than that obtained by Mas in 2010 (38.47%) and lower than that obtained by Convergència i Unió in 1984 (46.8%), 1988 (45.7%), 1992 (46.1%), 1995 (40.95%), although in terms of votes it is the highest ever obtained by a winning force (1,346,729 in 1984, 1,232,514 in 1988, 1,221,233 in 1992, or 1,198,010 in 2010).

Junts is an unequal alliance between Convergència and ERC, under the leadership of the first, supported by the social organizations driving the independence process, ANC and Omnium. Its creation marked the culmination of Mas's efforts to force a "unitary" list with ERC, and ensure his continuity in the presidency of the Generalitat. It is the direct result of the unrest of the pro-independence movement through the tribulations subsequent to 9N and, above all, the phantasm of a possible victory of a Catalunya en Común in the wake of Barcelona en comú, whose triumph shook the official account of Catalan politics.

Within Junts two projects coexist under tension. On the one hand, the claim of the Catalanist right to refound their political space riding on the independence process, once the instrument of Convergència is historically exhausted, building a new transversal "national" party to become the central pivot of Catalan politics. On the other hand, the desire of ERC, ANC and Omnium to articulate a unitary list that will ensure a pro-independence majority to continue the process of a break with the central state. The two strategic objectives are different, but not competing, the first feeding off the second.

Although Junts pel sí is the tool that ensures the continuity of Mas as head of the Generalitat and the independence process (without controlling it entirely, rather like a surfer who does not control the waves that drive him), it also expresses the sincere unitary aspirations of many people seeking a unitary politico-electoral reflection of the clamour expressed in the four large mobilizations of September 11 from 2012 onwards. It builds on the momentum of the citizens' movement for independence and provides a roadmap that appears plausible for the bulk of the majority social base of the pro-independence movement. There is, however, a searing contradiction between the hopes of its popular base and the subordination of its strategic project to a strict neoliberal agenda.

## **The dances of the PSC**

27S confirmed the loss of centrality of the PSC, whose historic decline is a deep seated trend flowing from its lack of

credibility both in the domestic and social arenas, after the two Tripartite governments in Catalonia (2003-2010) and the two Zapatero governments (2004-2011). It did however stabilize its decline after being on the brink of an irreversible "Pasokification" under the impact of 15M and the independence process, and the inconsistent "leadership" of Pere Navarro (November 2011-June 2014). But its 520,000 votes (12.7%) and 16 seats, while the worst in its history and lower than that of 2012 (523,333 votes, 14.6 %, and 20 deputies), show that it appears to have bottomed out. Its result is a success in relation to the initial predictions and gives the PSOE some hope faced with the imminent general elections. The most important thing for Iceta: to beat Catalunya sí qui es Pot. A crucial element to ensure a visible role in the next legislature. Once again, as in all the autonomous communities last May 24, Podemos was behind the PSOE. A direct torpedo to its hypothesis of rapid electoral victory out of the ashes of the parties of the regime.

Without doubt, the PSC has been known how to take advantage of Podemos's loss of momentum at the state level since January of this year and the inability of Podem in the Catalan context to capitalize on the victory of Barcelona en Comú on May 24, as well as Iceta's skill in combining (populist?) dances with oratorical abilities to attract a portion of the electorate not polarized by the independence debate.

## The fiasco of Catalunya sí que es Pot

No room for discussion, Catalunya sí qui es Pot (CSQP) was the major victim of these elections. The contrast is sharp between the initial expectations of a success similar to that of Barcelona en Comú and the results obtained, 364,823 votes (8.9%) and 11 deputies. And, symbolically, their debacle before a PSC which appeared sunk a few months ago is crucial. There are many reasons for this debacle and they intersect in a way that is not always consistent:

First, CSQP was a victim of its own phantasm and the threat that it would eventually constitute a candidacy in the wake of Barcelona en Comú precipitated the formation of Junts pel sí. This completely changed the political landscape, generating a demobilizing dynamic and a centrifugal leakage of potential votes toward Ciutadans and the PSC on the one hand, and the CUP and Junts pel sí on the other.

Second, CSQP was configured as an agreement from above between parties (one new but in decline and without a consolidated structure, Podem; another old, ICV, with a strong structure and apparatus, but not much electoral weight), with the lethal photograph of Pablo Iglesias with Joan Herrera as its founding event, without generating any type of popular dynamic. Just the inverse of what Barcelona en Comú had been (that doesn't mean that its campaign did not mobilize an important sector of society, as reflected in the numerical success of many of its actions). The unhooking of the Procés Constituent and the non-involvement of Barcelona en Comú stifled the project in its infancy. Of course, the limitations of both actors (little internal cohesion in the case of the Procés, and tiredness after the municipal elections and the assumption of municipal government in the case of Barcelona en Comú ) may partially explain its absence in the attempt to set up a "yes we can" nomination for 27S. But the primary responsibility lies with the bureaucratic style of the project headed by Podemos and ICV, which pushed away the two actors that would have been able to make a qualitative change to the project. Both parties overestimated their own strength and refused to renew the process to facilitate the incorporation of Procés and Barcelona en Comú. Definitely, what emerged at the end of July under the name of Catalunya sí que es Pot already had very little to do with the prospect of a Catalunya en comú that haunted Catalan political life after May 24. Can you attempt to continue the changing dynamics of the municipal elections without the support of Barcelona en comú? Can you claim to have credibility in the pro-sovereignty movement without the backing of the Procés constituent?

Third, the polarization around the debate on independence has been lethal to CSQP. It favours Junts pel sí, the CUP and Ciutadans. CSQP appeared in no man's land in this debate, with a position not always distinguishable from the

PSC (despite being very different). The initial claims of Podemos to transcend the framework of the independence debate were not met. And Podemos was overwhelmed by the framework it intended to transcend. The negative spiral for CSQP has been hellish. Not having a serious discourse on the independence process prevents discussion with the left social base of CUP and ERC. In the absence of a clear Spanish centralist discourse it cannot compete with Ciutadans. And being unable to generate a winning dynamic, a part of its vote went back to the PSC. This could have been resolved only with the ability to put on the table another focus of discussion in which CSQP would form an attractive field, and at the same time offer a solid proposal on the national axis, like a strong defence of a Catalan constituent process not subordinated to central state dynamics, which would meet the aspirations of the pro-independence movement's social base. Although in its founding manifesto CSQP demanded such a constituent process and the horizon of a Catalan republic whose final links with the Spanish state would remain open, its campaign discourse completely avoided such an approach, focusing on the struggle for a binding referendum.

It should be noted, however, that the insufficiencies of Catalunya si qui es pot in its discourse on sovereignty, while the fruit in the first instance of programmatic decisions taken by the forces that make up the candidacy, expresses what much of its social and electoral base thinks. And this, in turn, is the Achilles heel of the pro-independence movement and the Catalan left as a whole. It is a problem for the first, because without the support of the "yes we can" social base, its majority will always be adjusted, and also for the second, because it remains fractured between a minority position within separatism and a minority position outside of the same, unable to articulate a space that can be seen in a credible manner as an alternative majoritarian project. Forgetting the social base of "yes we can" is an almost symmetrical error, weakening the national profile to reduce it to an abstract defence of a right to decide without substantive content.

The combination between dependence on Pablo Iglesias to mobilize the electorate and the absence of strong Catalan references prevented CSQP from making the necessary synthesis to articulate its heterogeneous social base so far as the independence process is concerned. Iglesias, while able to mobilize a broad audience, seemed "lost in translation" in this campaign, with silly mistakes like the call for votes of "Catalans who are not ashamed to have Andalusian parents or grandparents from Extremadura". From the unnecessary criticism of David Fernandez in December 2014 until now, Iglesias has already tripped too often on the same stone, the independence process, with the clear outcome the visible and growing erosion of his image. The paradox of Catalan politics is that it lacks clear voices rejecting Mas from the left like that of Iglesias. But precisely what the leader of Podemos doesn't seem to understand is that the credibility of his virulent and correct anti-Mas discourse is mortally wounded, precisely because of his lack of credibility in the defence of Catalan national rights.

After this political breakthrough, Iglesias became a *bête noire* of the Catalan establishment. And not because he is not pro-independence, since Rajoy and Sanchez aren't either, but awaken contempt and derision rather than fear. He generates concern because he proposes a project of political and social change that does not pass through independence, and this raises uncomfortable questions that the bulk of the independence movement has been unwilling or unable to answer. Therefore, the repeated samples of Iglesias's ignorance of Catalan reality and its complexities constitute an error which is difficult to understand.

## Electoral successes and strategic ceilings of the CUP

In electoral terms, the CUP was one of the main winners of the night, with 335,520 votes (8.21 %) and 10 seats (126,435, 3.48% and 3 members in 2012), growing on the basis of the ERC electorate who did not want to vote for a list with Mas, new voters and those who felt dissatisfied with the weaknesses of discourse, radicalism and style of CSQP.

Its entry into the *Parlament* in 2012 was one of the first signs that a new political cycle was opening, after 15M and

the independence process, in which there space for parties that were playing outside the rules.. In strategic terms, the CUP has however three limits: first, the policy of outstretched hand in the national sphere and closed fist in the social sphere separated both areas too much, renouncing the real struggle to inject into the strategy of the bulk of the independence movement the idea that a process of independence required articulating as big a majority as possible, to introduce an emergency anti-crisis and anti-corruption plan. Second, it was too caught up in the discursive framework of the independence process and in its political scenario (agreement for the question of 9N, signature of its appeal, holding of 9N and so on). Third, it maintained a linear conception and construction of "popular unity", being very wary of any policy of alliances in which did not have a clear hegemonic role and of developing a strategy of confluence, on the basis of rupture, with the other left-wing forces essential to articulating majorities for change.

The politics of the CSQP and the CUP are comparable as are their respective strategic limits because, while the first comes out 27S weakened and the second strengthened, the shortcomings of the approaches of both in relation to the great earthquake that has shaken Catalonia in recent years has not allowed the crystallization of a pole of rupture with decisive effect in Catalan political life. Ground has doubtless been gained from 2012 onwards, but not to the extent of what was possible and necessary.

## The apocalyptic No of the PP and the Spanish centralist neoliberalism of Ciutadans

The No vote, whether articulated by the PP, Ciudadanos, Felipe Gonzalez, or financial power, only sold fear, reification of the institutional order and acceptance of the imperial dictates of global geopolitics. The combination of an improvised apocalyptic discourse and the contradictions of its spokespersons served to mobilize a portion of the electorate and keep it in tension. But it is not able to offer any credible alternative horizon.

Garcia Albiol, despite being convincing in his role of authoritarian horseman of the apocalypse, did little to contain the weakening of his party, associated with corruption and cuts as much as with the defence of the unity of Spain. The PP cannot compete with Ciutadans, which is capable of dressing up its Spanish centralist neoliberalism as a project of renovation and defending the "unity of the homeland" without appearing openly reactionary. The PP's poor result, 347,758 votes (8.5%) and 11 deputies (compared to 471,681, 12.98% and 19 seats in 2012) should be highlighted. Rajoy has once more been weakened at the ballot box and by the Catalan onslaught.

Often, Ciutadans is perceived in Catalonia only in relation to its Spanish centralism. But we must not forget the neoliberal nature of the party, pro-business and a faithful friend of the Ibex 35. Its ascent among a sector of the working class involves a reversal of political consciousness in a double sense, in the field of national identity and in the field of the social model. With its outstanding second place, 732,147 votes (17.9%) and 25 deputies (275,007, 7.57% and 9 seats in 2012), Ciutadans emerges from 27S with momentum for the general election, in which it may be presented as the main adversary of separatism in Catalonia, and it has obtained an important symbolic victory over Podemos.

## Heterogeneous challenges

An unstable scenario has opened. The pro-independence forces have won a relative majority of seats (62 +10 = 72), if not of votes (47.8%). Its absolute number, 1,952,482 is slightly higher than that of the yes-yes in the Consultation of 9N, 1,897,274 (although there anybody over 16 could vote). This shows the massive nature of pro-independence sentiment, but also a relative stagnation of its social base, and the limits of the policy of "first independence and then everything else" which has been a major strategic focus of the ANC. But the differences between Junts pel sí and

the CUP-Crida Constituent betoken a parliamentary majority which is unstable and full of contradictions.

On the immediate horizon, we can glimpse an unprecedented scenario of confrontation between the Catalan institutions and those of the state. And, in the confrontation between a democratic movement (putting asides its shortcomings) and a state and a regime whose deficits are apparent, there is no doubt about which side you need to be on at the decisive moments. Catalunya sí que es Pot should bear that in mind. The No campaign is based only on fear. The "Yes" bloc opens up possibilities and carries the seeds of hope, even though it carries a manufacturing defect, the hegemony of the neo-liberal right wing inside it, which threatens permanently to drown all the dreams Catalans have invested in independence and direct them toward a neoliberal project that empties sovereignty of all content. The CUP -Crida Constituent should not forget that.

The left-wing forces of rupture will have a significant number of seats, but overall far below what would have been possible in the event of having taken other paths. There were other possibilities. Other detours on the way. Perhaps more risky. Perhaps more complex. A triple challenge tops the agenda: defeating the state in its authoritarian confrontation with the independence movement, and transcending the agenda of the latter by introducing the proposal of a popular constituent and participatory process and an emergency plan to deal with the social crisis that helps rethink the terms of the debate, and articulate a new project, attracting a broad social spectrum and articulating a majority bloc, and embodying another model of Catalonia distinct from that of Junts pel Sí.