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Spanish state

# Catalonia: Referendum and constituent process

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**The electoral campaign for the Spanish state parliamentary elections on December 10, 2015 has brought back the elongated shadow of the great absentee of Catalan politics: the binding referendum. Denied by the state and replaced by the pro-independence forces with elections converted into a plebiscite, the presence of the absent referendum is felt increasingly.**

Forgotten by the pro-independence process which considers it a past stage and ignored by those who reject the elementary democratic exercise of the right to decide, the referendum however crept with almost the same force into the pre-election debate in Catalonia through the candidacy of En Comença Podem, the undoubted lever of a campaign that could culminate in the final breakdown of the Catalan party system as we have known it until now and with a shock similar to that already experienced in the city of Barcelona on May 24.

The referendum fell by the wayside after the decision of the Mas government, with the support of the pro-independence organizations, not to openly confront the state following the challenge of November 9, looking for a way out in the form of the alternative consultation eventually organized, and pushing toward the conversion of the parliamentary elections into a plebiscite.

The result of September 27, with a clear victory of the pro-independence forces in terms of a pro-independence parliamentary majority, opened a scenario in which there is a parliamentary bloc implementing a roadmap to independence but devoid of the uncontested legitimacy that a referendum majority would have had.

The denial of the referendum has become the quintessence of the undemocratic approach of the PP, PSOE and Ciudadanos towards the independence process in Catalonia. The demand is inappropriate. There is nothing to talk about. Discussion finished. End of story. The political No, accompanied by judicial coercion, has only one basic strategic perspective: to win time, wait until the Catalan pro-independence movement deflates after a war of attrition in the demoralization that festers and, as a last resort, try to disable the more conservative part of the pro-independence social base with some kind of limited and controlled reform of Catalan self-government.

However, despite its absence, the referendum, or rather the non-referendum, largely determines the stakes of the present confrontation. The denial of the referendum prevented the state from trying to defeat the independence process democratically, thus undermining its own legitimacy and institutional machinery.

And the absence of a binding consultation prevents the pro-independence movement from preparing for the final battle, as it is still immersed in an increasingly complex process, with each new step intensifying the clash with the state but without precipitating a final outcome. The referendum today seems as implausible, due to the correlation of forces in the Congress of Deputies, as it is necessary. Hence the need to place it, as En Comença Podem does, at the center of state politics both before and after the nationwide elections, also recalling that the democratic solution to the demands arising from Catalonia is a fundamental part of an overall democratic solution to the crisis of regime and a firewall against any operation of self-reform from above.

A scenario that must be kept in mind to be situated correctly in the discussions following the general election which will mark the end of the first part of a political crisis that will remain open after December 20.

The need to hold a binding consultation, however, operates in dialectical tension with the opening of a Catalan constituent process not subordinate to state logics, as a form of real and effective practical exercise of the

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sovereignty of the people and whose legitimacy derives from both the popular mobilization that started on September 11 of 2012 and the result of September 27 as well as March 15, 2011 which raised the constituent need from another perspective from that of independence, although with the democratic impulse as the common element.

We should not counterpose the referendum to the Catalan constitutional process. There will be no mandatory consultation in Catalonia without the existence of a movement that advances with its own agenda of rupture, taking its sovereign path, but without strategically disconnecting from state policy. And, on the other hand, the independence process will not result in a democratically legitimized outcome accepted by all (within and outside of Catalonia) without a binding consultation. Referendum and constituent process supplement and need each other. The one has little credibility without the other. The first appears on the agenda for December 20. The second was the decisive question on September 27.

A referendum proposal disconnected from a Catalan constituent process not subordinated to state dynamics appears as a mere form of shifting the goalposts and postponing the exercise of sovereignty by the Catalan people until a parliamentary majority is obtained in the Congress of Deputies. This moves the axis of the decision exclusively to the state level and would have crippling effects in Catalonia.

In reality it is necessary to advance on two fronts at the same time, initiating a constituent dynamic in Catalonia and fighting for a change in the balance of forces at state level in which December 20 should be a major first step and for which the Catalan mobilization and the state alliances woven from Catalonia for December 20 are decisive.

Conversely, a proposal for a Catalan constitutional process that does not contemplate the need for a referendum, which is not tied to the construction of a new majority in the state, misses a central piece in the democratic legitimacy of the process and in the formation of a broad Catalan political majority.

This has been the double weak point of the route followed by the declaration of initiation of the independence process adopted last November 9 in the Catalan parliament, lacking a strategy also addressed to the advocates of the right to decide and culminating in a legitimate consultation.

The management of the dialectic between referendum and Catalan constituent process holds the key to a strategy of rupture whose rhythms and scales do not overlap mechanically in a harmonious way, but which can be positively framed. How? By opening with a triple confluent step: advancing in a sovereign manner from Catalonia, articulating between the peripheries to acquire a decisive centrality as they already do in *En comú Podem* and the Galician *En Marea*, and contributing to a new plural majority of rupture in the state assembly, either this December 20... or in the second round of a game that the dominant classes are far from having won in advance.