

14.10.2014 Catalonia, the stifled referendum

Stay within a legal framework or turn to civil disobedience? That is the dilemma facing Catalan nationalists, split between *Convergència Democràtica*, the party of Generalitat President Artur Mas, and *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, the party led by Oriol Junqueras, which is leading the polls in Catalonia.

Obviously the stubborn refusal of the Spanish government, supported by a very broad Spanish-minded consensus in Madrid, has succeeded in derailing the machinery of the Catalan referendum so emphatically launched by the huge public demonstration of 11 September 2014.

This Monday, the Executive of the Generalitat, which had issued the referendum decree suspended by the Spanish constitutional court, decided not to force a confrontation on 9 November next. Artur Mas has said "There will be a consultation on 9 November, but it won't be based on the decree." In justification, Artur Mas compared the situation with facing a breaking wave: should you dive and let it wash over you, or stand and face it and risk being carried away? Now, the planned referendum had to address colossal organisational problems: electoral lists to be drawn up, police officers and officials at risk of being prevented from taking part in organising the vote, and so on.

Those who wanted a confrontation with Madrid have expressed their disappointment. Even before Artur Mas's speech, after the breakdown of the meeting between the parties involved in the referendum, Oriol Junqueras declared: "The Spanish government has erected every possible obstacle to prevent the Catalans from being able to vote. For its part, the Catalan government is now launching a new consultation, which cannot be a credible substitute for a popular referendum." The ERC then issued a press release in which the Catalan left announced that it wanted "to assist the [Catalan] government in spite of everything, since we should seize every opportunity to denounce the nature and the attitude of the Spanish government."

The Catalan movement also includes a "third element", civil society, which is fully engaged in the process through powerful organisations like *Omnium*, without doubt the largest such association in Europe in terms of membership, and through the Catalan National Assembly, an impressive body devoted to the pursuit of self-governance, which organised the huge demonstration of 11 September in Barcelona.

For these civil society movements, unity is an ongoing priority, and, for any nationalist party, bearing the responsibility for breaking it would have serious consequences. Hence the events of 9 November will be half-hearted in comparison with the hopes of the 11 September demonstrators. But anyone in Madrid who imagines that the Catalan question is now closed has another thing coming.

Quite the contrary, the ERC has already announced the agenda for the coming months. In the words of its president Mr Junqueras: "We must build a parliamentary majority sufficient to pass a [unilateral] Declaration of Independence and have it approved, so as to start a constituent process for the Catalan Republic."

As in Scotland, the Catalan nationalists are at once disappointed and confident. They are disappointed to be deprived of the success they hoped for so passionately, but they are confident because all the events of recent weeks have demonstrated a formidable surge in support for their ideas.

On 9 November, Catalonia will take a new step forward. Yes, it will be less ambitious than hoped, but it will nevertheless be an important stage in the historic process under way, a process that may take further months or even years before reaching its completion.