

14.1.2016. The end of the crisis in Catalonia

At the last minute, with just a few hours to go and after more than three months of fraught talks, when breakdown seemed inevitable, the pro-independence Catalan majority succeeded in reaching a government agreement on Saturday 9 January at 7.00 p.m. Had an agreement not been reached by midnight, new elections would have been called. The Generalitat, convened as soon as possible, met on Sunday 10 January to swear in Carles Puigdemont, mayor of Girona and right-hand man of the outgoing President Artur Mas, as the new President.

The elections took place on 27 September and the legal time limit for swearing in a new executive ran to midnight on 9 January. After that, unless the deputies were agreed to elect a new President, new elections would have been held in March.

This crisis risked compromising the pro-independence majority that emerged from the elections held last 27 September: 62 seats for the Junts pel Sí list bringing together Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, and 10 for the Candidatura d'Unitat Popular, a pro-independence group on the radical left. Thanks to this absolute majority (the Generalitat has 135 seats, so 68 votes are needed for an absolute majority), the Catalan parliament passed a declaration of independence on 9 November 2015, unleashing an independence process which is historic for the country and for Europe. But this fundamental political agreement broke down catastrophically when it came to reaching an agreement to form a government.

The radical left parties were up in arms against the centre-right politics embodied by the outgoing President Artur Mas because, faced with the economic crisis which has destabilised Spain in general and Catalonia in particular, he had taken austerity measures during his previous term of office.

This rejection of the President's economic and social policy was coupled with a generalised aversion throughout Spain to the corruption that has rocked the political class, both in Madrid and in the autonomous communities. In Madrid and in Valencia, huge scandals have broken out which have tainted the ruling Partido Popular, but Barcelona is not immune, and Convergència, in the person of its historic President-leader Jordi Pujol, has also been dragged before the anti-corruption courts.

For the CUP, Artur Mas - himself above reproach, but Pujol's direct political heir - could not represent Catalonia as it moved towards independence. And throughout the campaign it hammered out this message, which tripled its vote.

For the other pro-independence group on the left, ERC, as for everyone in civil society who has spent the past ten years promoting the independence movement that triumphed in the 27 September elections, this was a time for unity. For them the political courage of Artur Mas justified his appointment as leader of Junts pel Sí, and their candidate for the presidency. Their list obtained 62 seats, the opposition to independence 63 seats, and the CUP 10 seats. There was no question that the CUP would join the anti-independence camp, but, for a single vote (at the end of the count in the Girona district, Junts pel Sí lost a seat by a handful of votes), Junts pel Sí was forced to an agreement with the CUP, whose abstention would not be enough to ensure a stable majority.

Discussions took a theatrical turn as the CUP continually overplayed its hand, targeting Artur Mas and Convergència, thwarting hopes of a positive outcome and, at the same time, tearing itself apart internally and upsetting its voters. The low point was reached at a CUP Assembly where 3030 delegates met to vote on a draft agreement. The result was an unbelievable stalemate: 1015 for, 1015 against, throwing the nationalist camp into even deeper internal crisis.

Meanwhile, the Spanish general election had been held, and the results in Catalonia had shown the

weariness of the electorate in response to the procrastination of the pro-independence parties.

Artur Mas grasped the potentially catastrophic historical consequences for Catalonia if an agreement were not reached. The CUP, threatened with heavy losses in the event of fresh elections, realised that it could not let it come to that. At the cost of public self-criticism, regretting having argued so bitterly with the other nationalist parties, it agreed to lift its obstruction. And at the last minute, an agreement was found: Artur Mas stood aside and proposed in his stead his right-hand man in Convergència, Carles Puigdemont, mayor of Girona, the second city in Catalonia. The CUP, for its part, designated two of its ten deputies to provide a stable majority to the new executive of the autonomous Catalan community.

After a long and stressful political crisis, reason finally won the day.