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Spanish state

# Catalonia: earthquake in common

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**While awaiting the next Catalan parliamentary elections, the municipal elections of 24 May 2015 have confirmed the profound transformation that the Catalan party system has experienced since 2012, an accelerated melting of traditional loyalties and the emergence of new references among young people who never had the old ones. Without doubt, the most interesting thing is the success of the convergence candidacies around Podem, the CUP or, in the case of Barcelona, Ada Colau and her team, which have shattered the local political landscape and, in doing so, shaken up the whole Catalan political map on the eve of the crucial elections on 27 September 2015, which Artur Mas did not want and that he postponed as much as he could after the 9 November 2014 referendum on independence.**

The results of the convergence and the new candidacies show the enormous potential of the situation and record some notable successes, with Barcelona at the head. [1] We must not forget, however, that apparatus interests and some “sectarianism in common” have led to missed opportunities in many locations. This is something to bear in mind in the decisive months that lie ahead, in which breadth of vision and strategic ambition should govern the movements of all the actors fighting for another model of society. As an orientation compass, one equation stands out: unity (or convergence) and a aspiration of rupture. Which, in turn, has a reverse negative to exorcise: sectarianism and the mentality of routine institutional management. Each of the two sides of the equation (and of its antithesis) combines separately, but without a synthesis between the two any strategy is lame.

The victory of *Barcelona en Comú* has highlighted the great hidden truth about Catalan politics: the historic weakness of CiU, its narrow social support and the vulnerability of its hegemony, despite its electoral rebound after the referendum on independence.

The Catalan popular forces (like those in the rest of the state) face a double strategic challenge: governing Barcelona and the other areas conquered in a spirit of rupture and, at the same time, articulating a majority alternative in the country as a whole. These are interrelated actions. Entrenching oneself in municipalism and neglecting the national level would be a mistake in the long run that would weaken the transformative potential at the local level, while focusing on how to beat Mas without taking into account the new realities of local convergence would be to deprive ourselves of powerful levers rooted in the territory that allow us to “go up” with more force than ever. Let us be frank: we are in uncharted territory.

The Barcelona earthquake, resting on other local success, can be replicated at the Catalan level. Not by mechanically copying models, but by being inspired by its goals and looking for appropriate formulas. After 24 May we face a challenge which is both complex and perhaps unrepeatable, so urgent and historical is it: articulating an alternative to Artur Mas, that definitively dynamites the moribund party system for the benefit of those at the bottom and changes all the coordinates of the political debate. Two strategic axes should guide us: an anti-austerity programme and the opening of a constituent process. Both are sufficiently important to generate convergences, both are flexible enough to accommodate diverse identities.

The Catalan popular forces are crossed by a double contradiction that must be faced: the tension between a culture of rupture and an institutionalist culture, and the position to take in relation to the independence process. Its non-resolution would give new life to Artur Mas, who seems to govern more because of the inability of others to build an alternative than his own capacity to refound his political space and articulate a new instrument (the “party of the President”) to ensure a new and lasting Catalan rightist hegemony as he has done with the CiU for two decades. There are multiple possibilities, various combinations, and many proposals, for moving forward and undoing existing obstructions. But they are either trying to articulate a comprehensive block (with Podem ICV, CUP and so on) as

proposed by the Proceso Constituent of Teresa Forcadell and Arcadi Oliveres; or working with the idea of two differentiated political blocs: one, that of the majority, in the wake of Barcelona en Comú, for which the candidacy of Albano Dante in the Podemos primaries can be the embryo for going further and articulating the necessary convergences; and the other, around the CUP. Seeking a post-election collaboration appears as an impossible challenge.

Within the pro-independence campaign the situation is particularly fluid. In 2014 Artur Mas seemed drowned out by an ERC that progressed in last year's European elections and was emerging as the new hegemon of the centre left, playing on a rupture at the national level and on continuity at the social level. The 9 November referendum marked a turning point, in which ERC was sidelined and Mas began to regain ground, capitalizing on the success of the consultation. A comeback that, however, does not contradict the historical decline of CiU and does not eliminate the need to "refund" and expand its political space through the failed unitary list. Another phenomenon emerged after the consultation: the rise of the CUP, which had been converted to a relevant actor for the management of the referendum, and propelled politically and in media terms by false friends interested in using them either (unsuccessfully) to curb Podem and Ada Colau, or by claiming (with success in places such as Barcelona) to outflank the ERC from the left.

The result is that ERC, despite consolidating important political space in the 24 May elections where it scored remarkable results, sees its claim to contest Mas's leadership undermined. The rise of the CUP is a positive factor that strengthens the forces of rupture, while in the short-term serving to weaken ERC as Mas's only competitor in pro-sovereignty camp. In the long term, it is only going to increase the instability of the pro-sovereignty process and leave Mas in a blind alley, as he can hardly lead a parliamentary majority post 27S that depends upon the CUP. This raises a possible scenario in which all false friends can become deadly adversaries: what to do before the investiture of Mas if the latter wins the elections and if the parliamentary majority depends on the CUP.

Ada Colau's victory destabilises the official political story built in Catalonia, all attempts to analyse Catalan politics based solely on the independence process, without seeing that this overlaps, in a way that is inconsistent and not rhythmic, with 15M and its legacy of Mareas of all kinds. There are many problems in Catalonia, with many political expressions, many contradictions to solve. Catalonia cannot be read in a single dimension. In its cartography, politics intersects with the social and national, and both are driven by a desire for democracy.

How does Ada's victory affect the independence process? This is the big question that torments politicians and commentators these days. The question, basically, is quite terrifying: why should an independence process that seeks a better country be disturbed by the victory in Barcelona of a candidacy which is not pro-independence but favourable to the right to decide, with a head of list who votes yes-yes, and which embodies a project of social justice? In reality, the question itself shows the structural defects of the independence process and its political and strategic limits – the absence of an explicit social content accompanying the demand for independence, the stagist prioritization of the latter over everything else, and the uncritical assumption of Mas's political leadership.

A double strategic lesson emerges from the process opened by the 11 September 2012 Catalan independence demonstration and, primarily, for all its components except CiU: broadening its social basis, incorporating an emergency social plan against the crisis, and a proposal for a detailed popular constituent process that opens the door to a real discussion of the model for the country. The generic references to social justice with which the *Asamblea Nacional Catalana* (ANC) increasingly associates its message evaporate into nothing if they are not specified in an explicit programme of social minima for the national transition process that, according to their road map, should be opened by September 27, with clearer demarcations from the economic policy of Mas.

May 24 marks the beginning of an open situation, undoubtedly with unexpected turns and twists. It bodes well for a scenario of fragility of the party system, fissured by growing gaps which can only open opportunities for change from

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below. The victory of *Barcelona en Comú*<sup>o</sup> allows people who are opposed to Mas's Catalonia to go on the offensive in this final stretch of the agonizing journey up to the parliamentary elections of September 27. What is key is not to lose the political initiative and to complete what began on May 24. To do this one thing seems necessary. To ensure that Artur Mas ceases to appear as the indispensable man, the only one who has a credible narrative, and make him appear as what he is: one of the major obstacles to a sovereign Catalonia from all points of view in which the term could be construed seriously.

*Translated by IVP from [Tiempo roto blog](#).*

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[1] For more detail on the Barcelona campaign see *Open Democracy* "[Beyond Ada Colau: the common people of Barcelona en Comú](#)".