

Spain on the Verge of Disarray

October 21, 2017

On October 1, Spain's most prosperous region, Catalonia, held a referendum vote regarding the status of their territory. Namely, if Catalonia felt necessary to secede from Spain and become independent. The referendum was called by the Catalan government, despite the Spanish high court interpreting such referendums illegal in 2006. Spanish national authorities and police attempted to close polling stations by raiding mobs of people and firing rubber bullets into crowds with the intention of deterring would-be voters.

Due to police-led raids, authorities within the region claimed more than 800 people were injured.

On the night of the vote, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy publicly declared, "At this point, I can tell you very clearly: Today a self-determination referendum in Catalonia didn't happen. We proved today that our state reacts with all its legal means against every provocation."

Once all ballots were counted, Catalan authorities claim 90 percent of the vote went in favor of secession, despite only 43 percent of the electorate actually voting.

On October 10, the Catalan government signed a declaration of independence, but will be suspended for the sake of diplomatic talks with Madrid. The Spanish government immediately dismissed the move.

United States President Donald Trump only briefly discussed Catalonia.

"Spain is a great country, and it should remain united," Trump said. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department spokeswoman said the United States has no position on the referendum.

One of the primary reasons Catalan independence supporters want to secede is the economy. The prosperous Barcelona region is viewed as propping up the rest of the financially unstable Spain. Catalonia is heavily industrial and modern, with the region accounting for 19 percent of the country's GDP. According to The Telegraph, if Catalonia officially became independent, their GDP per capita would be thirty-five thousand dollars, which is larger than South Korea, Israel, or Italy.

President of Catalonia, Charles Puigdemont, has political support from both sides of the parliamentary aisle. The conservative Democratic Convergence of Catalonia party, and the far-leftist Popular Unity Candidacy party have pledged their support for independence.

Culturally, the Catalans already feel separate from the rest of Spain. Similar to the Basque region of northwest Spain, Catalan is its own language, as well as cuisine being unique to the region. Compared to their regional neighbors, Catalans often are characterized as work-driven and conservative.

On October 4, Spanish courts placed Josep Lluís Trapero, who is Catalonia's regional police chief, under investigation for supposed sedition. Three other suspects were included in the investigation.

French authorities have publicly announced they will not recognize Catalonia as an independent state if they chose to break away.

On the day of the referendum, FC Barcelona, Catalonia's most recognizable sports team played Las Palmas to an empty stadium.

"We tried to suspend the game all day long but it wasn't possible," Barcelona president Josep Bartomeu said.

Barcelona closed the stadium to display their discontent with the incidents in the streets.

On October 8, exactly one week after the referendum vote, hundreds of thousands took to the streets of Barcelona in support of Spanish unity. Waving Spain's national flag and European Union flags, chants of "Don't be fooled, Catalonia is Spain" echoed through the streets.

Barcelona police reported 350,000 protestors were in attendance, but organizers of the protest claim nearly 930,000 turned out.

In a surprising move on October 21, Rajoy announced the Spanish central government will enact Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution and remove Catalan leaders and order direct rule of the region. Many Catalan leaders and officials have condemned the move and have insisted they will not be intimidated by Madrid.

"We will not take a step back," said the president of the Catalan parliament, Carme Forcadell. "Mr. Rajoy isn't conscious that by attacking the institutions, he is attacking the society of this country."