

The Catalan dilemma

by GWYNNE DYER

The demonstrations, some of them violent, are still going on in Catalonia a week after Spain's Supreme Court sentenced nine separatist leaders to between nine and 13 years in prison for sedition. This was the last thing Spain's prime minister Pedro Sanchez needed three weeks before a national election in which his Socialist Party was already losing ground to right-wing nationalist parties.

Catalan separatists are convinced that the evil 'Spanish state' as a whole is conspiring to crush their movement, but the Court had little choice because those leaders deliberately broke the law. They held an illegal independence referendum two years ago in which few people except the separatists voted, and used that 'victory' to proclaim independence.

Opinion polls always show that a majority of people in Catalonia don't want independence, but 92% of those who participated in the referendum voted for it. It was cynical manipulation which exploited the fact that the anti-separatist parties in Catalonia all told their supporters not to vote.

The bid for independence failed when Madrid dissolved the regional parliament and removed the separatists from office. In the subsequent provincial election in December 2017, the pro-independence parties got 47.7% of the vote, so the separatists would probably have lost a real referendum by the same margin.

Yet it was the separatists who formed the next provincial government too, because they enjoy strong support in rural constituencies where almost everybody speaks Catalan. As in most developed countries, the system gives more weight to rural voters, so the separatists won five more seats in parliament than the pro-Spain parties and are still in power.

The real problem for the separatists is that about half the people in Catalonia are Spanish-speakers who have no interest whatever in seceding from Spain. Some are relatively recent arrivals, but most were born in Catalonia, the children and grandchildren of migrants from other parts of Spain who were attracted by the booming economy.

It's still one of the richest parts of Spain, and again as in most developed countries some of its tax revenues are transferred to help poorer regions of the country. This is bitterly resented by most Catalan-speakers and partly explains the drive for independence, although the most powerful factor is simply ethnic nationalism.

How can ethnic Catalans achieve their goal in a democratic way, however, when half the voters by definition are not interested in it? The only way is somehow to define Spanish-speakers as not really full citizens of Catalonia, and though they never say that in so many words that was their unspoken justification for the manipulation they practised in the 2017 'referendum'.

Josep Borrell, Spain's foreign minister but himself a Catalan, recently offered a lethal analysis of this attitude: 'I think the root of the problem is that the independence movement denies the 'Catalanness' of those people who aren't in favour of independence. When you ... claim that only those who think like you are 'the people', that's a totalitarian attitude.'

'Totalitarian' is too strong a word, but there's no question that this opinion is widely shared among Catalans, and that it makes Spanish-speakers keep their heads down. You'd never think, looking at the half-million-strong crowds of protesters who have been thronging Barcelona's streets in the past week, that more than half the city's residents are actually Spanish-speakers who oppose independence.

On the other hand, you cannot fail to feel some sympathy for the Catalan nationalists, for as recently as 1950 the great majority of the city's residents were Catalan-speakers. You also cannot ignore the history: Catalans are not oppressed now, but the only language used in the schools and in all official communications in Catalonia under the Franco dictatorship, right down to the 1980s, was Spanish.

None of this has been forgotten by Catalans, who at one time even feared that their language might be lost. An independent Catalonia might have restricted the arrival of so many Spanish-speakers if such an entity had existed 75 years ago, but it's too late now.

Those Catalans who respect democracy but want independence therefore face an insoluble problem, and it's only Spain's refusal to permit a real referendum that spares them from having to face up to the conflict between these two values. But the Spanish constitution talks of the 'indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation' and does not permit any region to hold a referendum on independence.

This is hardly surprising in a country that has had four civil wars in the past two centuries, but it effectively guarantees that the unrest in Catalonia will continue indefinitely.

So far it has been almost entirely non-violent, but the traditional pro-independence civil society groups, the Catalan National Assembly and Omnium Cultural, are now being outflanked by Tsunami Democratic, a more combative and secretive group. (It was they who occupied the airport last week.)

They are almost all young, they are at home with apps and social media, and they are up for a fight, but Catalonia is still a pretty peaceful place. Long may it remain so.