



## The Kurdish and Catalan Referenda

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: There are lessons to be drawn from the differences and similarities between the Kurdish and Catalan referenda. Each defeat can lead to a better future for all stakeholders.**

On October 1, 2017, of those eligible to vote from among the 7.5 million-strong Catalan nation, two million (42%) showed up for the referendum on independence from Spain. Of those who cast their vote, 90% favored peaceful separation.

On October 5, the Constitutional Court of Spain moved to suspend the Catalan Parliament's scheduled session in order to prevent its issuing an official declaration of independence. During its next session, on October 10, the Catalan Parliament, invoking the right to independence conferred upon it as a result of the referendum, fell short of a definitive declaration. It refrained two more times from declaring a formal separation from Spain, preferring instead belatedly to propose a "dialogue" of last recourse – to no avail.

Invoking Article 155 for the first time in Spain's annals, Madrid in turn sought to delegitimize Catalonia, enforce its own centrality, bring the secessionist rebels to court, and "restore democratic rule of law."

What led Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont to be hoist with his own petard was not so much Madrid's calling of his bluff, but the fissures within his own ranks (individuals who had their own kind of change in mind, competing with anti-capitalists pursuing their own interests) and between "separatists" and the more unobtrusive "loyalists."

The street demonstrations by the non-secessionist Catalan "silent majority" that followed the referendum proved far more effective at disavowing

Puigdemont's leadership than Madrid's legalistic gymnastics or financial institutions' HQ-translocation tactics. The EU's indifference to Spain's "internal affairs" throughout the crisis provided the *coup de grace* that sealed the fate of the independence cause.

Meanwhile, in landlocked Iraqi Kurdistan, the president of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), Masoud Barzani, had also decided his long-awaited moment of triumph had arrived. A week before the Catalan referendum, on September 25, 2017, Barzani proceeded with a referendum on Kurdistan independence. Taking no heed of US and British reservations, he defied Turkish and Iranian threats of massive retaliation and went ahead with the vote. More than 3 million Kurds, or 72.16% of the population, exercised their right to vote, resulting in a 92.73% tally in favor of independence.

The international response varied. For understandable reasons, only a few countries and political groups (including Kosovo, Quebec, Catalonia, Israel, Ireland, Italy, and left-wing parties in various countries) were supportive. The KRG's immediate neighbors, as well as Spain, China, and Iraq, were not in favor. Russia maintained a diplomatic ambivalence, and Canada and Belgium, not surprisingly, remained neutral.

The referendum, which was declared to be non-binding, was nevertheless deemed a threat by Iran and Turkey. It was militarily punished by Iraq, which recaptured the spaces controlled by the KRG as a result of its having defended Iraq against ISIS. The Kurds' main ally in that endeavor, the US, left them twisting in the wind.

What effectively did Barzani in was not so much the potential for irredentism opposing Erbil to Baghdad, but the wedge subtly driven by Iran between Erbil (the core and purview of Barzani's separatist KDP, or Kurdistan Democratic Party) and Sulaymaniah (the turf of the Talabani's PUK, or Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party, now a partner of the KDP's alienated former ally, the Gorran Party).

By resigning in the aftermath of the disaster, the Kurdish patriot Barzani, who – even for many in his own entourage – may have overstayed his welcome by extending his rule over the past 12 years, may well have opened the path to a credible confederation of Iraq. This would be via the enforcement of the long abused Article 140 of the 2005 constitutional blueprint, at last permitting the implementation of indispensable provisos long left in limbo. These would include ethno-spatial normalization via territorial delineation and repatriation in the context of a reviewed, mutually approved status of Kurdish autonomy; precepts and procedures of revenue sharing to be set by unanimous accord; and a thoroughly updated status of the security forces.

Inside the KRG, there may develop more cooperation and loyal competition among all political parties for the sake of the greater common good.

A similar reversal of fortunes may be in the making for the Catalans in Spain, if the parties concerned keep their cool.

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