

SPAIN: Puigdemont's arrest will not solve Catalan deadlock (for now)

- The arrest of former First Minister Carles Puigdemont in Germany on 25 March has galvanized once again the Catalan pro-independence movement, adding to the increased mobilization triggered by the jailing of five secessionist politicians on 23 March.
- However, the display of unity by separatist parties is unlikely to lead to an agreement to appoint a new first minister soon.
- Moreover, the ongoing Catalan impasse will continue to spill over into national politics, as the Nationalist Basque Party (PNV) will not support the central government's budget in parliament until Madrid removes its direct rule on the region.

The last days' developments in Catalonia follow a familiar pattern. The failed investiture vote of Josep Rull on 22 March following the abstention of the anti-capitalist Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) party underscored once again the divisions between secessionist parties. However, the judge's decision to remand five separatist politicians without bail incensed the pro-independence movement and led to calls for separatist parties to form a united front. This is a reminder that the dynamics of the Catalan issue will continue to be punctuated by the ongoing legal proceedings.

The secessionists' display of unity – they will force a debate in the Catalan parliament on Wednesday on Puigdemont's situation – will not translate into a quick agreement to form a government, however. Together for Catalonia (JxCAT) and CUP are using his arrest to push the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) to hold a vote to appoint him in order

to continue defying Spain's legal order. However, ERC remains wary of making moves that impede the formation of a workable government and complicate the legal situation of the secessionist politicians targeted by the ongoing investigation. In sum, Puigdemont's arrest does not bridge the divisions between secessionist parties over what to do next, especially as none of them seems to be ready to assume the political cost of abandoning a unilateral strategy – at least at this stage.

At the same time, last week's failed vote of investiture triggered the 2-month period during which a government needs to be formed, effectively setting 22 May as the deadline by which a president has to be appointed. This will put pressure on secessionist parties to find a workable solution, such as asking Puigdemont and another separatist MP currently on the run to give up their seats in order to secure a majority without the support of CUP (assuming that Puigdemont is extradited, he could also be banned from public office, thus automatically losing his seat).

Implications beyond government formation

As shown by the protests over the weekend, the level of mobilization by pro-independence supporters will probably increase in the coming days, potentially leading to new clashes with the police. However, the pro-independence movement has lost its most prominent figures because of their legal woes, which will limit its ability to organize widespread and long-lasting demonstrations.

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In terms of the impact of the Catalonia story on national politics, Ciudadanos announced today that it had reached a deal with the ruling People's Party (PP) regarding the budget for this year. This will put additional pressure on the PNV, which is still refusing to support it while direct rule of Catalonia by Madrid continues. However, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy still has time to negotiate the support of the Basque party, as the budget which will be adopted soon by the government will have to pass through parliament in the coming months before being finally approved.

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