

What's happening in Catalonia?

25 years in jail for holding a vote

The trial has begun of 12 Catalan leaders who took part in organizing the 2017 independence referendum, which Spain calls illegal. **The entire cabinet of the 2017 Catalan government is either on criminal trial or in exile** — to be arrested if they ever return.

The Catalan leaders face up to 25 years in jail for doing what they were democratically elected to do. Most are charged with “rebellion”, a crime that specifically requires a violent uprising. But the only violence was from thousands of tooled-up Spanish police on referendum day. The Catalan movement has been consistently pacifist and nonviolent.

Democracy stifled

After years of requests to Madrid for an independence referendum, and years of refusals, a Catalan government was elected on a mandate to hold one. While views on independence were about equally split, surveys consistently showed that **80% of Catalans wanted to hold a vote**.

Spanish authorities did all they could to stop it, and ordinary Catalans showed an amazing commitment to democracy, smuggling 10,000 ballot boxes past police into Catalonia through a network of citizen activists, and sleeping overnight in the schools that were about to be used as polling stations.

Spain's response to a pacifist mass democratic movement was to lock its leaders in cages. Even the speaker of the Catalan parliament, who simply did her job by facilitating debates, has been in pre-trial prison for a year and faces a 17-year sentence. Hundreds of town mayors face prosecution. Even teachers were targeted in the repression, for explaining to pupils why their schools had been smashed up by police.

In this poisonous political atmosphere, the leaders of both main Spanish right-wing political parties have openly floated the idea of **making pro-independence Catalan parties illegal**.

Physical force, legal force

Images of unprovoked police brutality on referendum day shocked the world.

Riot police sent by Madrid baton-charged crowds with their hands raised in surrender, shoved pensioners, dragged women out of polling stations by the hair, and threw voters down-stairs. Hundreds were injured. One man lost an eye, shot by police in Barcelona.

The Spanish state then turned from violence to legal force. Most of the Catalan cabinet was rounded up and locked in Madrid jail cells. Many have been **jailed without trial for over a year**, and now face decades more. Those who left the country — including former education minister Clara Ponsatí in St Andrews — can never go home.

Successive Spanish governments have refused to negotiate with Catalan leaders unless — ludicrously — they avoid the topic of independence. **They chose paramilitary police and prisons over discussion and democracy.**

Political prosecution

Spain has such **poor judicial independence** that even judges and prosecutors have gone on strike twice in the last nine months to demand greater independence and less political interference. Senior Spanish politicians have publicly pronounced the Catalan leaders guilty, violating the most basic conditions for a fair trial. Judges on the Supreme Court, which will try the Catalan leaders, are essentially political appointments.

Through another defect of the Spanish legal system, Catalan leaders will be prosecuted not only by the state, but also by lawyers for Vox, a far-right ultra-nationalist party similar to the BNP or Le Pen's Front National.

International observers have been barred from the trial, prompting strong criticism from human rights organizations. Dozens of defence witnesses have been denied, including the president of Catalonia at the time of the referendum, now in exile.

German courts refused to extradite the president for "rebellion". Switzerland, now home to two of the political exiles, **rejected extradition requests as "political"**. Repeatedly embarrassed by other European courts,

Spain gave up its extradition attempts.

The UN Expert on democratic rights at the time of the referendum, Alfred de Zayas, has argued in detail that the right to a referendum was protected by both the Spanish constitution and international law. **Self-determination is a right, not a crime.**

But legal or not, some laws are simply unjust. Slavery was legal; sex between men was illegal. It is absurd to claim that putting pieces of paper into a box is a high crime worthy of decades in jail.

Medieval justice

The basic principle of democracy is that those who are governed have the right to decide *how* they are governed. **That is the definition of democracy.** And that is what the Spanish state has repeatedly blocked.

You don't have to support Catalan independence, or even have an opinion, to support the right of a people to determine their future.

Spanish courts want to lock elected politicians and pacifist activists in cages for 25 years, for holding a peaceful vote. **This is medieval**, like something from the era of Braveheart.

The EU has been shamefully silent, at every turn supporting the agenda of its member state, Spain. While individual MEPs, MSPs and MPs have been supportive, Europe is failing Catalonia. **It is up to ordinary citizens to lift up our voices and show our support.**