

Spanish and Catalan history in a nutshell

By MANNY GONZALEZ

(1st of 3 parts on Catalunya Independence Crisis Explained)

I didn't want to be around to watch history in the making, but here I am in Barcelona, witness to a tragicomedy that will, one way or the other, affect the future of Europe.

You have surely read about the bid of some people in Catalunya (Catalonia in English) to declare their region independent from Spain. Here's a complete rundown on what's been going on, from ancient times to present.

Catalunya and its major city Barcelona occupy a small but strategic part of the northeast corner of Spain. Catalunya was originally established by the Frankish Kingdom (modern France, Northern Italy, and a big part of Germany) as a buffer territory against the Moors. Hence, Catalunya was sort of a French client-state or loose colony.

In 1137, the upwardly mobile Count of Barcelona doubled his domain by marrying into the Kingdom of Aragon, just to the west. We can presume that no one had to twist his arm. Thus, Catalunya merged with or absorbed its western neighbor.

Fast-forward about 330 years to 1469. Isabel of Castile/Leon (from which, our word *kastila*) made what turned out to be a highly consequential marriage with Ferdinand of Aragon/Catalunya. Both would succeed to their respective thrones, merging Catalunya into Spain though it was more or less left alone. Together, Isabel and Ferdinand drove the last Moors out of Spain, and also incidentally financed Christopher Columbus.

Up to this point in history, Catalunya had done okay. Starting out as a sacrificial border area, through two judicious marriages it became an important part of Spain, which was just on the verge of becoming a superpower.

Now we get to the confusing parts.

In 1641 for not especially good reasons Catalunya declared independence. This started out as a Catalan peasant revolt against Spain, then quickly morphed into a revolt against the Catalan aristocracy. Alarmed, the Catalan aristocrats asked to become part of France, to protect them from Catalan peasants. The French agreed, but Spain then mounted a 10-year war to retake Catalunya, and eventually reconquered most of the region. Catalunya's first attempt at secession resulted in years of war, tens of thousands dead, and the loss of a bit of territory (the French kept an area called Roussillon).

Catalunya was quiet for almost two centuries, until Napoleon invaded Spain in the early 1800s, whereupon he made Catalunya a kind of protectorate. Now the Catalans had a clear shot at becoming French again, but instead had forgotten their history, and sided with the Spanish, who eventually prevailed.

During the 19th Century Catalunya rapidly industrialized, which meant that it had large numbers of factory workers inclined to foment social unrest. The political movement known as Anarchism (misnamed, the movement aspired to a classless society, a kind of perfect Socialism) spread throughout Spain and especially Catalunya. In 1931, the Spanish King had to abdicate, and Spain became a republic.

By 1934, Catalunya was an "autonomous" state within Spain, largely controlled by leftists and Anarchists. Suddenly, without having any army or other means of actually achieving it, Catalunya's government declared independence.

Eighty years later, it is hard to see what was the point of this declaration, other

than to piss everyone else off, which it did. The Catalan leaders were arrested within 10 hours.

Things were quiet for two years but in 1936, the leftists won the national Spanish elections, and retained power in Catalunya as well. The prospect of Spain becoming Communist incited the losing factions to mount an armed rebellion, thus starting the Spanish Civil War.

In simple terms, the Civil War protagonists were, on one side which was eventually called the Republicans, those loyal to the elected leftist/Anarchist government, plus industrialized working-class regions with Communist sympathies, all inspired by Joseph Stalin. The other side was eventually called the Nationalists, consisting of the landowners, big business, monarchists, and the Catholic Church, inspired by Hitler and Mussolini. (Neither side had good role-models.) Meanwhile, both the Basque region and Catalunya sided with the Republicans, out of conviction and the prospect of more autonomy.

Shortly after the Civil War started, Anarchists in Catalunya launched an opportunistic side-revolution, gaining control of large parts of the region, including Barcelona. Similar movements in other parts of Spain weakened the Republican cause. After three brutal years, the Nationalists under General Francisco Franco won.

To recap, in the course of three centuries, in every case of attempted separation from Spain, Catalunya's motivation was Leftist. Remember this fact tomorrow.

Next: *The unfolding current crisis in Catalunya*

(The author is founder of Plantation Bay Resort & Spa and now a part-time foreign correspondent.)

The unfolding current crisis in Catalunya

By MANNY GONZALEZ

(Part 2 of Catalunya Independence Crisis Explained)

After Franco died, in 1978 the Spanish government was reorganized as a parliamentary monarchy. In Catalunya, the new Constitution was ratified by 95% of voters. So the Catalans today can hardly claim that the Constitution, in which they agreed to be part of Spain, was rammed down their throat.

Thus began a period of unprecedented prosperity and stability for Spain. It joined the European Union in 1986 and today is the EU's fifth-largest economy. Catalunya has progressed in step.

Nonetheless, Catalan independence seems to be an idea that just won't go away. For the past decade, some Catalan leaders have steadily promoted the idea that they both deserved to be independent, and would be far better off economically if they were. Both ideas have had ready buyers, but the reasoning is badly flawed. (We'll get back to that later.)

Thus, whereas previous Catalan independence movements (starting in the 17th century) were Leftist, the current movement seems to be in large part Ultra-Rightist (though the far Left, for its own reasons, is also separatist). Why is this important? Because some Catalans today think they are continuing a centuries-long fight for self-determination, when in fact their "cause" is entirely new, consisting of greed and a longing for a past Catalan Golden Age that never was.

In 2006 the Catalans passed their own Constitution, which hardly seems necessary unless you're planning to secede.

A "non-binding" independence referendum was held in 2014. On a turnout that was below 50%, about 90% of voters favored independence. That's according to Catalunya's government, which never allowed an independent count of the ballots. The figure could have been totally fabricated, for all anyone knew, and even so was far less resounding than the 1978 vote by which the Catalans approved the idea of being part of Spain.

In the 2015 elections, for the first time there was a pro-independence majority in Catalunya's regional Parliament—but not by much, perhaps 72-63. The national government should have paid more attention to this election, but perhaps was too complacent, never believing that separatists would forge a majority coalition.

In 2017 Catalunya's majority coalition grew increasingly frustrated with the national government's refusal to take their independence bid seriously, and now called for a "binding" referendum, to be held on October 1, 2017. The

national government and national courts ruled this referendum illegal, since it is patently outside the framework of the Spanish Constitution passed in 1978, contrary even to Catalunya's own laws which required a majority of their Parliament, but the Catalan government went ahead anyway.

The national government brought in police and tried to prevent the referendum altogether, which proved to be a serious mistake, evocative of the Franco period. Catalans turned out in large numbers to vote, though even more of them stayed home. October 1 was marked by images of what appeared to be police brutality, which drew sympathy for the separatists from many quarters.

On the other hand, the Catalan government declared that people could vote wherever they wanted, and no one would verify their name against any voter list, which sounds suspiciously like an open admission that the vote would be cooked. By 8 p.m., a surprisingly short span of time after the polls closed, the Catalan government announced that 92% had voted for independence, on an anemic 43% turnout.

As before, there was no independent verification of the vote count, just a "take our word for it." Later, Spanish national police would release to the public an intercepted telephone conversation from a senior member of the Catalunya government, who is now being investigated for sedition. The gist of the conversation, which took place early on referendum day, was "Don't worry, whatever the actual results, we have 1 million more Yes ballots ready." Filipinos have nothing over the Catalans.

On October 3, the separatists called for a general strike to protest police brutality. Hundreds of thousands of Catalans participated, and Barcelona was shut down for the day. That evening, the King of Spain addressed the nation, slamming the separatists, who in turn slammed him.

On October 8, Catalans opposed to separation finally got energized and called for a rally in favor of Spanish unity. Hundreds of thousands participated. Apparently, all along there were lots of people who were quite happy to remain Spanish, but felt intimidated by the very vocal and very ag-

gressive separatists.

In the meantime, big businesses in Catalunya started announcing that they were moving their social (and in some cases fiscal) headquarters out of Catalunya. Six out of the seven Catalan companies that are components of Spain's Ibex 35 stock market index left in just a few days after October 1. These included the only two big Catalan banks remaining, afraid of a run on deposits if Catalunya should actually become independent and they were caught headquartered in a location outside the European Union.

Barcelona's largest industry is tourism. Hotels started reporting significant drops in their expected occupancy, with estimated drops of between 20-50% compared with the same months in 2016. Catalunya's leaders just yawned.

The Futbol Club de Barcelona initially declared that if Catalunya became independent, it would simply quit La Liga and start playing in a different league, maybe the Premier League. A few days later, probably after being told they weren't welcome anywhere else, FCB recanted and said its future was inextricably intertwined with La Liga. Whoa! Hundreds of thousands of Catalans, who couldn't care less about banks fleeing or tourists canceling, suddenly had something to fret about.

Despite clear evidence that they were heading toward an economic abyss, the Catalan separatists continued undismayed. On October 10 the Catalan president announced the region's independence, then immediately suspended its effects to allow "dialogue" with the national government. The separatists called on fellow Catalans to paralyze Barcelona again, but this time only a few thousands showed up. The national government, in turn, has repeatedly stated that dialogue is futile since the Catalan idea of dialogue is to repeat like a broken record that full independence is the only thing that will satisfy them.

Be careful what you wish for.

Next: Key questions answered

(The author is founder of Plantation Bay Resort & Spa and now a part-time foreign correspondent.)

opinion

Key questions about the Spain/Catalunya crisis answered

By MANNY GONZALEZ

(Conclusion of Catalunya Independence Crisis Explained)

Question: Why should you care about what's going on in Spain?

Answer: Because it offers lessons for the Philippines.

Question: Is Catalunya a "nation"?

Answer: It has a language, a Constitution, a territory, a government, and a police force. The Catalunya government has also done a good job of indoctrinating children in the region to "think Catalan." On the other hand it has a population which is split almost straight down the middle on whether it should be a separate nation or not. For every Catalan who wants to be independent, there is another who is happy to be not only Catalan and Spanish, but also European.

My personal biggest objection to the idea that the Catalans are a nation is that their (those in favor of independence) national identity consists almost entirely of the wish to not be Spanish. In almost every other aspirational respect they are in fact Spanish, as the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* pointed out in a recent editorial. The only differences I ever found were that they disapprove of bullfighting, and that there are more sour, xenophobic people in Barcelona than in other cities I have lived in (though most Catalans are fine people, just like everywhere else).

There is not much of an affirmative Catalan national identity, such as French thinking they are foodies or Filipinos injecting humor into adversity. If you Google "You know you're ___ if," and insert almost any nationality - Spanish, Filipino, Latvian, Italian, etc., you'll get a ton of hits. Put "Catalan" and you get Nothing. Check it out.

Question: Why do the separatists want independence? Are they justified?

Answer: "Because it would be so nice to have our own country, where no one will tell us what to do, and we pay taxes only to ourselves."

As motives go, this is a common one. After all, what do you think the signers of the American Declaration of Independence were thinking? However, Catalunya doesn't really qualify under currently accepted international principles, which affirm the right to self-determination only in cases of the third-world colonies of European powers, or (and here there is less consensus) where there is a clear oppression of a distinct region or people (so-called "remedial" secession). The Catalans are far from being oppressed - they enjoy more autonomy and higher incomes than most Spaniards.

Neither international law nor common sense support the idea that you can secede from another country just because you think you will be better off financially. Were that so, what would stop Manhattan or Palm Beach, Florida from seceding from the US? Self-interest alone is not a sufficient condition for sovereignty.

Question: How did the hard-core Catalan separatists convince half the population to fall in with their dreams of independence?

Answer: By emphasizing the possible benefits (pride, tax money) while ignoring the costs and pitfalls. The separatists promised that an independent Catalunya would automatically remain part of the European Union, Schengen, and the Euro currency system.

This is simply false, an *auto-mentira* (self-delusion). Not a single member of the European Union will support unilateral secessions or a proliferation of sovereign nations. The whole thrust of the Euro-

pean Union is to lessen the impulses of local nationalism and promote a sense of European-ness, a thrust which so far has led to unprecedented prosperity and peace on the Continent.

EU leaders have in recent days repeated these sentiments, and warned that in the unlikely case that Catalunya could enforce its independence, it would most likely never re-join the EU since admission requires a unanimous vote. Cut off from the rest of Europe, with new borders north, west, and south, Catalunya's vaunted \$35 billion annual exports (almost all of that to Spain or the EU) would evaporate. Only unadulterated pride could make them think otherwise.

Question: But haven't some countries been able to make a success of unilateral secession in modern times?

Answer: The Catalan separatists used to cite the Slovenia model. In 1991 Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia, fought a 10-day war of independence, was quickly recognized by other countries, and is now a member of the EU. But Yugoslavia was a country engaged in genocidal wars, and it was already clearly fracturing into many pieces. The analogy with Spain fails on many grounds.

The separatists give other examples of partially successful revolutions but all are even more far-fetched than Slovenia, and have the common thread that the rebellious regions were so wretched they had nothing to lose by seceding, hardly the case in Catalunya.

Question: So why are the Catalan separatist leaders plowing ahead regardless? Don't they understand that they are heading for at best a loss of autonomy and at worst economic suicide for the region?

Answer: Who ever said that politicians are rational? When I watch the Catalan separatists on TV, the dominant impression I get is they are giddy, intoxicated with self-importance, like a child whose tantrum is

getting him the desired attention. But when a child throws a tantrum, personally I don't blame the child. I blame the parents. In this case, the "parents" are the central authorities in Madrid, who could have done many things over the past decade to head off the crisis, but didn't. The national government kept backing up, backing up, emboldening the separatists; they should have drawn a line in the sand much earlier.

Question: What will happen now?

Answer: If the Catalan leaders persist, the national government will take control of Catalunya. If it comes to that point, the national government has to do it right, with firmness against the ringleaders but no retribution against the general public. Public services must be visibly more courteous, more efficient, more functional, than under the Catalans.

If the Catalan leaders back down, the situation might still fester. The national government should call for snap general elections, and hopefully convincingly defeat the separatists in Catalunya. Then more moderate voices need to be heard in Catalan schools, universities, print and broadcast media, and social media.

If the separatists still win in the snap elections, then Spain should give the people what they want and deserve, let go of Catalunya, close the borders, and wash its hands. Catalunya has no army, no foreign service, no central bank, few remaining large companies, no foreign trade agreements, no means of accessing international financial markets, and no reserves with which to even pay salaries; meanwhile everyone in Catalunya on a pension can either move elsewhere in Spain, or try to collect from the Revolutionary Catalan Government. I have a feeling that in three months the region will be begging to become part of Spain again.

(The author is founder of Plantation Bay Resort & Spa and now a part-time foreign correspondent.)

Catalunya independence crisis: Cleaning up the mess

By MANNY GONZALES

Last week I reported on the Catalan independence crisis, and made these suggestions:

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The Catalan leaders did persist. On Oct. 23 the central government of Spain announced it would seek emergency powers from the Senate, as provided in the Spanish Constitution, to temporarily strip Catalunya of its autonomy. There were some dissenting voices, but a large majority of Spaniards, and even a large segment of Catalunya, favored this move, as a way of restoring order after Catalunya's rogue leadership (in effect) started a coup d'etat. This was the so-called Article 155 Option. Many doubted the central government would have the nerve, but (if I may say so), I called it right.

During the past week the separatists, now realizing they were on board a Titanic of their own making, oscillated back and forth between many wild options (declare independence, negotiate an amnesty for themselves in exchange for backing down, embark on a prolonged siege of civil disobedience, or call their own elections to re-vindicate the legitimacy of their proposed secession). On Oct. 27 they finally chose to declare independence via their Parliament, the Catalan President having chickened out of declaring it unequivocally himself.

Seventy out of 135 assembly members voted affirmatively, while most of the rest walked out when the vote was called.

On the same day, the central government got approval to implement Article 155 and take direct control of Catalunya. Then the central government did something totally unexpected by most observers: now that it was officially in charge of Catalunya, its first official move was to call for snap elections on Dec. 21. In other words, after stepping in to take control from the Catalans, it immediately indicated it would promptly give that control back to legitimately elected Catalan leaders (even possibly the very same secessionists), provided there was a fair and informed vote, now that Catalans were correctly educated that the secession movement was based on a pack of lies.

No, businesses would not flock to an independent Catalunya. No, other countries would not rush to congratulate them on self-determination. No, the European Union did not want a separated Catalunya as a member.

It was widely regarded all around Spain and in Europe that by itself calling for elections, the Spanish central government pulled off a brilliant coup. Now the separatists could not claim that "those damned Spaniards will rob us of our dignity, and control us indefinitely." In the meantime the separatists would have to decide whether to maintain they were really independent, and refuse to take part in a Spanish-overseen election, or participate and in effect admit their independence declaration was an empty sham, i.e., that they had lied to their own separatist supporters.

If I may say so, my suggestion of snap elections was right on the money.

For this week, the separatist leaders had vowed not to accept being fired, removed from office by the central government. But on Monday Oct. 30, in the

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end all the regional Ministers ("Concellers" in Catalan language) seem to have resigned themselves to vacating. The head of Parliament, one of the most ardent separatists, has publicly declared acquiescence to the fact that this Parliament has been dissolved.

To continue the comedy, late Monday the Catalan President — the one who had vowed he was willing to go to prison for the cause of Catalan independence — sneaked out of Spain and fled to Belgium. There, the first thing he did was hire a lawyer to possibly seek political asylum. He left behind his separatist officials and supporters to face the music.

It is hard to see how this can be viewed as anything but cowardice, desperation, and disloyalty to all the Catalans he told the fairy tale of independence to.

Let's see how this plays out.

And now for some unsolicited advice to assorted parties:

Like much of Latin America, we were a part of Spain for three centuries. The Philippine government should have prominently joined the chorus of nations (most of Europe, Latin America and some others) denouncing the Catalan independence declaration and promising never to recognize the wannabe new country. (If anyone in the Filipino government did, it went unreported in the Spanish press.)

We cannot forever be going around insulting other people as our primary mode of "foreign relations" and "diplomacy." Supporting the Spanish authorities would have been a risk-free way to earn a little goodwill with other countries, and remind others that we are not always *contra-bida*. We blew it.

The Spanish Fiscal's Office (with the same functions as a Filipino fiscal) needs to be discriminating about whom to charge for sedition or rebellion. And while it may have to file charges promptly, it shouldn't be in a rush to arrest anyone, but instead should leave the accused at liberty to run and campaign for office in the Dec. 21 elections. Voters will be wary of voting for these particular persons anyway, considering all the trouble and

embarrassment they caused. The central authorities should give Catalan voters the chance to throw these people out themselves.

This advice holds double for the dismissed Catalan President, Mr. Puigdemont, with a small caveat: he should not be allowed to run in his native city of Girona, where he would certainly win whatever office he runs for, but should be required to run (if at all) in Barcelona, where he has in fact been living while President. Let Barcelona judge him through the ballot.

Find the money. Watch the money. It is now emerging that the Catalan separatist leaders have been funneling public money in questionable ways. These include hiring KPMG, Price Waterhouse, and IBM, among others, to design the tax collection and public records functions for a "hypothetical" independent Catalunan state. Also, the Catalans apparently spent tens of millions of euros to fund their illegal referendum on Oct. 1; according to some reports, the money paid for mobilization, free snacks for voting several times, and the grunt secretarial work of filling out *in advance* one million ballots saying Yes to Independence, to be stuffed into ballot boxes before the polls even opened.

All this just goes to show that Autonomy may be a drink that doesn't quench thirst. The more money some people control, the more they will be tempted to want 100 percent of the pie, instead of settling for 90 percent. The Spanish central government needs to figure out how these funds were siphoned, and establish mechanisms to prevent it happening again, whether in Catalunya or in another autonomous region of Spain.

In preparation for the Dec. 21 elections, the Spanish government must indeed ensure that the Catalan voters are informed. It can't be complacent as it was for the past 10 years. It has to go into overdrive to "tell it like it is" — about Catalunya's non-existent prospects as an independent country outside the European Union, about the fraudulent conduct of the Oct. 1 referendum which the separatists used as an excuse for their insurrection, about the numerous lies over the past years that the separatists told in order to convince Catalans to join the cult

of independence-seekers. The independence movement must be likened to a religious cult, because that's what it was.

In addition to the stick, there have to be some carrots and feel-good elements to the information blitz: how Catalunya has prospered as a part of Spain; how Spain put Barcelona on the world map by paying for the 1992 Olympics; how the rest of Spain is proud of the Catalan contributions to world culture, from Gaudi to Dali to top-class wines and chefs.

A comprehensive drive has to be launched, spanning TV, radio, print, social, and even billboard media, to tell the right story. Democracy must be underpinned with a press (media in general), which is both free and reasonably accurate.

Imprisonment is not a satisfactory punishment even if particular separatists are found guilty of sedition or rebellion. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and incarceration creates martyrs. There are much easier, less costly, and more permanent ways to punish a convicted secessionist or rebel:

Cancel their Spanish passports, Spanish driver's licenses, and Spanish identity cards. "You wanted to be free of Spain? Now you are." In Europe you cannot open a bank account, board a plane, check into a hotel, drive, or even receive a parcel from Amazon without one of these documents.

Of course, rescind their pensions and right to socialized services like medicine.

As a "humanitarian" gesture, allow them to remain in Spain as refugees from the defunct Catalunan Republic, but without issuing any documents.

With these simple measures the guilty can be made into charity cases and objects of derision. This is far worse punishment, and more of a deterrent, than imprisonment. It would also leave the remaining separatists with no rallying cry. "Give us back the Spanish documents and Spanish welfare benefits that we renounced by declaring independence" is not a convincing slogan for the streets.

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