

Spain's Catalonia Sets Date for Independence Vote



Barcelona, June 9 (RHC)-- Catalonia will hold a referendum on splitting from Spain on October 1st, the head of the region said on Friday, setting the stage for months of confrontation with the central government which says such a vote is illegal and must not take place.

Previous secessionist challenges in Catalonia -- a populous wealthy region whose capital is Barcelona and which has its own language -- were blocked by Spain's conservative government and the Constitutional Court.

"The question will be: 'Do you want Catalonia to become an independent state in the form of a republic'," according to Carles Puigdemont, president of the government of Catalonia. He said attempts to agree to a date and the wording of the question with the Madrid government -- which is vehemently opposed to allowing Catalonia to split from Spain -- failed and left him with no other choice than moving unilaterally. "We have always made very diverse offers and all of them have been rejected without any exception," Puigdemont said.

Pro-independence campaigners staged a symbolic ballot, organized by volunteers rather than government officials to get around court restrictions, in 2014, months after Scots voted to stay in the United Kingdom. Some 2 million people voted in favor of secession in that non-binding ballot, though turnout was relatively low.

It is not clear how far the legal wrangling may go this time as the Catalan regional government has said it would throw all its weight behind the vote. Under Article 155 of Spain's constitution, Madrid has the power to intervene directly in the running of Catalonia's regional government, forcing it to drop the vote.

Such a move could involve sending in the police or suspending the regional government's authority to rule. This is widely seen as a last resort move, however, and many analysts believe the clash will instead culminate in regional elections in Catalonia.

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