

# *Catalan Separatists Win Absolute Parliamentary Majority*

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Barcelona, December 22 (RHC)-- Catalan separatists won a crucial snap poll Thursday, plunging their region into further uncertainty after a failed independence bid rattled Europe and triggered Spain's worst political crisis in decades.

With turnout at a record high and 99.6 percent of the ballots counted, the election handed a mandate back to the region's ousted separatist leaders, even after they campaigned from exile and behind bars.

In a clear indicator of the huge gulf over independence afflicting Catalan society, anti-secessionist centrist party Ciudadanos was meanwhile on course to win the biggest individual result with 37 of the 135 seats in the regional parliament.

"It's a strange feeling. We won the majority of seats, but we lost in votes. As such both sides will be able to claim victory," 26-year-old doctor and separatist supporter Fran Robles told AFP after the results were announced.

"It's a good reflection of the reality that Catalonia is politically divided," he added. But unless the three pro-independence lists fail to clinch a deal to work together in the coming months, they will rule Catalonia with 70 of the 135 seats in parliament -- two less than their previous tally of 72.

For Catalans on both sides of the divide the day had been a moment of truth, following weeks of upheaval and protests unseen since democracy was reinstated following the death in 1975 of dictator Francisco Franco.

"This is a result which no one can dispute," deposed leader Carles Puigdemont said from self-imposed exile in Belgium, as he celebrated the separatists' win. "The Spanish state was defeated. (Spanish Prime Minister Mariano) Rajoy and his allies lost," he told reporters.

The Spanish government called the election after it took the unprecedented step of stripping Catalonia of its treasured autonomy in the aftermath of an independence declaration on October 27 that rattled a Europe already shaken by Brexit.

At stake was the economy of a region that has seen its tourism sector suffer and more than 3,100 companies -- including the largest banks, utilities and insurers -- move their legal headquarters out of Catalonia since the referendum.

The declaration came weeks after a banned independence referendum on October 1st, which saw a police crackdown that sent shockwaves around the world.

Rajoy and his conservative cabinet tried to nip the independence movement in the bud, sacking the regional government and dissolving its parliament.

In a further obstacle for the separatist cause, the judiciary pressed charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of funds against the secessionist leaders.

Puigdemont, who had fled to Belgium where he tried to rally international support for the separatist cause, has not since returned to Spain, where he faces arrest. His Together for Catalonia list nonetheless secured the best result of the three separatist groupings -- in a major upset for Rajoy's government.

"Puigdemont president!" chanted Puigdemont's campaign manager Elsa Artadi at a rally celebrating the result. "The result we have obtained is heroic, we have won, Mr Rajoy," Together for Catalonia candidate Eduard Pujol said.

What still remains unclear, however, is whether Puigdemont will be renamed president, and if so, whether he will return from Belgium and how he might govern.

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