

Catalonia ex-leader Puigdemont returns to Spain despite arrest warrant

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Carles Puigdemont returns to Spain after seven years of self-imposed exile despite a pending warrant for his arrest [Nacho Doce/Reuters]

Barcelona, August 8 (RHC)-- Catalan separatist leader Carles Puigdemont has returned to Spain after seven years of self-imposed exile and despite a pending warrant for his arrest.

He appeared before a throng of supporters in Barcelona on Thursday, pumping his fist as he climbed on to a stage surrounded by officials of his hardline party, Junts, at the Arc de Triomf monument located near the Catalan Parliament.

"I've come today to remind you that we're still here," Puigdemont told thousands of cheering supporters. "Long live Catalonia!" Many in the crowd waved red, yellow and blue flags and chanted slogans demanding Catalonia's secession from Spain.

Puigdemont fled Spain over his role in a failed 2017 independence bid for the wealthy region.

After his brief address, Puigdemont appeared to head to the regional parliament for the investiture vote to elect a new leader. But the assembly began the vote without him being present.

It was not immediately clear where he was. Police set up road blocks within Barcelona and leading out of the city, an interior department spokesperson said, according to the Reuters news agency.

His potential arrest and imprisonment could unleash new turmoil in Catalonia.

The building in central Barcelona housing the regional parliament was fenced off and surrounded by police. His arrest could also delay the swearing-in of a Socialist government in Catalonia and jeopardise the national government's fragile alliance with Junts, on which it relies for legislative support.

Socialist Salvador Illa, who is backed by the left-wing separatist ERC party after a bilateral deal last week, is expected to be voted as leader.

The Socialists hope taking control in Catalonia after a decade of separatist rule will turn the page on the independence drive, which has been losing support in recent years.

Meanwhile, far-right party Vox was set to hold a counterprotest outside Parliament. Its secretary-general, Ignacio Garriga, said on X that "we will not tolerate the humiliation of seeing a criminal and fugitive from justice enter parliament".

The Spanish parliament passed an amnesty law in May pardoning those involved in the failed 2017 secession bid, but the Supreme Court upheld arrest warrants for Puigdemont and two others who were also charged with embezzlement, ruling that the amnesty law does not apply to them.

Puigdemont says the referendum was not illegal and so the charges linked to it have no basis. "Things are complicated in the sense that there's this interest in stopping him. But at the end of the day, he's a member of parliament. He's a former president. So if he is arrested, this would be against the immunity of the members of parliament," Mar Aquilera Varques, a constitutional law professor at Barcelona University, told Al Jazeera.

"There are some people who are tired of this political crisis. But many people in Catalonia still want independence," she added.

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