

# FINANCIAL TIMES

November 26, 2012

UK

by Miles Johnson and Julius Purcell

## Spanish constitution crisis looms after poll

Catalonia election  
Disagreement  
between Rajoy and  
Mas threatens to  
become worse, say  
**Miles Johnson**  
and **Julius Purcell**

As candidates cast their ballots in Catalonia's elections yesterday, few could resist declaring the historic importance of a vote likely to have lasting consequences from Barcelona to Brussels.

"New pages are being written in the book of our history," said Artur Mas, the nationalist Catalan president, after leaving a polling booth, while Oriol Junqueras, leader of the leftwing nationalist Esquerra Republicana party, proclaimed: "We are writing the prologue of a great book."

How the chapters read, however, will depend on a politician barely visible on the day. Yesterday, Mariano Rajoy, Spain's prime minister, was at pains to ask journalists to "not talk to me about politics" when on

a visit to the King of Spain, following the monarch's hip operation.

Now facing a reinvigorated Catalan nationalist movement, the Spanish leader will not have many more opportunities to avoid talking about politics. As his government teeters on the brink of requesting a European bailout, the possi-

bility of open political warfare between Madrid and Catalonia risks transforming Spain's economic turmoil into a constitutional crisis.

Mr Rajoy's challenge, after months of acrimonious exchanges between his ruling rightwing Popular party and Mr Mas's *Convergència i Unió*, will be whether he can draw the poison from a disagreement that some observers argue risks becoming worse.

"There are only two possibilities now," says Xavier Vives of the IESE Business School. "The first is to continue the dirty war between the two sides, which is the road to disaster, or to negotiate. The second, more rational option, is the one I hope will prevail".

Rational debate, however, had become scarce. After the Spanish government declared that if Mr Mas called a referendum, he would be acting against the law and could be arrested, both parties were reduced to arguing over who would retain control over the region's police force in the possibility of a territorial dispute.

The tone of the contest degenerated again after the appearance of an anonymous police dossier, published by the *El Mundo*

daily newspaper, alleging that senior figures from within the CiU party, including Mr Mas, held illegal Swiss bank accounts.

The Catalan president denied the allegations contained in the anonymously

drafted police report, and accused his political opponents of deliberately fanning the story to influence the election.

Although there was no official confirmation of whether the document was genuine, or that any investigation by Spain's tax authorities was under way, senior members of the Rajoy government continued to make ambiguous references to the accusations

'There are only two possibilities now. Continue the dirty war, or negotiate'

**Xavier Vives**  
**IESE Business School**

up until this weekend.

While avoiding mentioning Mr Mas by name, Cristóbal Montoro, Spain's budget minister and the man responsible for tax investigations, said: "Those who should explain themselves are those who have undeclared bank accounts in Switzerland."

For Mr Mas, the comments were evidence of a conspiracy by the Spanish government to discredit him and derail his project to force a referendum on independence. "What is a democracy worth when the sewers of the state are used to bury the voice of the people?" he said, when the allegations first arose.

Mr Rajoy meanwhile was moved to deny that he was involved in any conspiracy.

But even in the routinely robust exchanges between Catalan nationalists and the Spanish centre right, the scars of the election campaign threaten to undermine any possibility of a compromise.

Mr Mas, a recent convert to the idea of holding a referendum following Mr Rajoy's outright rejection of his request to renegotiate the control Catalonia has over its tax revenue, will now argue he holds a mandate to press ahead with an independence vote Madrid argues is illegal.

For Spain's central government, the idea of granting greater fiscal control to a region saddled with a €42bn debt, which has

already requested an emergency €5bn credit line from

Madrid to stave off default, is both economically and politically unacceptable.

Mr Rajoy has attempted to stay above the pre-election bickering, appearing at pains to avoid inflaming tensions with a Catalan population that feels it has contributed too much to Spain's other regions, and is suffering austerity imposed from Madrid disproportionately.

Whether the Spanish prime minister can diffuse Madrid's disagreement with Catalonia will not only define his leadership, but could have lasting consequences for Europe's debt crisis.

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