

Angry protests erupt in Catalonia over ruling against independence leaders



Balcelona, October 14 (RHC)-- Angry protests erupt across Catalonia against a decision by Spain's top court to sentence several Catalonia leaders to up to 13 years behind bars for sedition over their role in an independence referendum back in 2017.

Spain's Supreme Court on Monday sentenced nine separatist leaders from Catalonia to between nine and 13 years in prison for sedition over their role in the failed independence bid, triggering protests across the region.

Three other defendants who were also on trial for their involvement in the October 2017 referendum held in spite of a ban and a short-lived independence declaration, were found guilty only of disobedience and not sentenced to prison.

All defendants were acquitted of the most serious charge -- rebellion -- but leading separatists were quick to condemn the court's decision and the jailed men sent out messages of defiance, urging people to take to the streets.

The regional head of Catalonia, separatist Quim Torra, called for an amnesty for all 12 leaders and said he would seek an urgent meeting with Spain's King Felipe VI and acting Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez. In a televised speech, Torra called the verdicts “an attack on democracy” and said: “We demand the release of political prisoners and of those in exile. We demand amnesty ... for all those who have been persecuted.”

Former head of Catalonia's regional government, Carles Puigdemont, said the prison sentences were an “atrocity.”

In Barcelona, three main streets were blocked by protesters holding signs calling for “Freedom for Political Prisoners.”

Outside the pro-independence Omnium Cultural headquarters in Barcelona, a crowd chanted: “We'll do it again,” a slogan used by separatist supporters who want to hold another referendum. Protesters in Tarragona blocked the A7 highway to Barcelona and several regional roads across Catalonia, officials at the Catalan road traffic agency said. An earlier disruption to the regional train network outside the town of Girona, a separatist stronghold, had ended.

Much is at stake in how the court's decision will be received, both for Spain and for its wealthiest region.

Catalonia's independence drive attracted worldwide attention, triggering Spain's biggest political crisis in decades and unnerving financial markets. Separatist protests have been largely peaceful but police sources have said authorities are prepared for any violence.

Spanish authorities are keen to avoid any condemnation from abroad of the sentence as too draconian, and the separatist movement will have to decide how to react to the ruling.

Activists from the region's two biggest grassroots pro-independence groups — the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and Omnium Cultural — have urged followers to rally in the evening while the radical CDR (Committees for the Defense of the Republic) have also promised “surprises.”

The jailed separatists said via social media that they would carry on their fight. “Nine years in prison won't end my optimism. Catalonia will be independent if we persist. Let us demonstrate without fear, let us move forward determinedly from non-violence to freedom,” said Jordi Sanchez, who was sentenced to nine years in jail.

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