

Spanish government pardons nine Catalan separatist leaders

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The pardons lift the remaining years of the nine individuals' prison terms', but do not overturn their ban on holding public office [File: Emilio Naranjo/Pool via Reuters]

Madrid, June 23 (RHC)-- Spain's government has issued formal pardons for nine Catalan separatist leaders imprisoned for their part in a failed 2017 independence bid.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said Tuesday's move was needed to diffuse longstanding tensions in Catalonia, where the referendum-fuelled drive to break away from Spain four years ago plunged the country into its deepest political crisis for decades.

“The government has taken the decision because it is the best decision for Catalonia and the best decision for Spain,” Sanchez said in a televised appearance. “We hope to open a new era of dialogue and build new bridges.”

But opposition to the pardons has been fierce, with officials across Spain’s political spectrum – and secessionists – accusing Sanchez’s administration of pulling off a political stunt. Former Catalan Vice President Oriol Junqueras, who in 2019 received the heaviest sentence of 13 years in prison for sedition and misuse of public funds, will go free along with his associates after spending three and a half years behind bars.

The other eight included former cabinet members of the Catalan government, the former speaker of the Catalan Parliament, and two leaders of secessionist civil society groups. Their sentences ranged from nine to 12 years.

The pardons lifted the remaining years of their prison terms while keeping intact their status as being unfit to hold public office. The government said the pardons could be revoked if their beneficiaries tried to lead another breakaway bid in the wealthy northeastern region.

“These pardons do not depend on their recipients renouncing their ideas, and nor do we expect them to do so,” Sanchez said. “But these people were never put in prison for the ideas they hold, but rather for having violated the laws of our democracy.”

One of those pardoned, Raul Romeva, who was sentenced to 12 years in prison for his role as Catalonia’s foreign affairs chief, said the region would continue its struggle for self-determination. “By pardoning nine people, they will not hide the repression they continue exercising against hundreds of separatists. We won’t give up the fight: amnesty and self-determination!” he tweeted.

Tensions over a desire for secession in the Catalan-speaking region of 7.5 million grew in earnest about 10 years ago, as economic hardship weighed and discontent grew with the then-conservative administration opposed to greater autonomy.

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