Far-right surges before election as Catalan issue polarises Spain

Sam Jones Madrid Stephen Burgen Barcelona

Spain’s main parties are scrambling to head off the rise of the far right as polls indicate the Vox party could surge into an unprecedented third place in Sunday’s election. The socialista government of the caretaker prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, has been desperate to cool tensions over the Spanish supreme court’s decision to jail nine Catalan separatist leaders. But it has also criticised the pro-independence Catalan regional government for taking too long to condemn the violence that erupted after the judgment and for continuing to peddle what it says are secessionist fantasies.

The government’s stance has angered rightwing parties, which have demanded a much tougher approach and attacked Sánchez for being too soft in the face of the threat to national unity. Pablo Casado, leader of the conservative People’s party (PP), said in a debate on Monday night that Sánchez did not believe “in the Spanish nation”, while Santiago Abascal, the Vox leader, referred to events in Catalonia as “a permanent coup d’état”.

Sánchez retaliated by laying into Casado and Albert Rivera, the leader of the centre-right Citizens party, reminding them that they had enlisted the support of Vox to take power in regional governments. “You two represent the cowardly right in the face of an aggressive far right,” he said.

Polls suggest Sánchez’s Socialists will win the most votes on Sunday but again fall short of a majority, as they did in April’s election. The PP appears to be bouncing back from a disastrous showing last time, but things look bleak for Citizens, which has lurched further to the right and refused to help Sánchez form a government. Its loss seems to be Vox’s gain: with support for Citizens plummeting, the far-right grouping could move past it and the anti-austerity Unidas Podemos to become the third biggest force in Spanish politics. Three years after Podemos was widely - but incorrectly - predicted to leapfrog the Socialists to become Spain’s leading leftwing party, the talk is once again of a sorpasso (overtaking).

“It’s clear that everything that’s happened in Catalonia in reaction to the sentence has completely captured the public agenda,” said Guillem Vidal, a postdoctoral researcher at the Berlin Social Science Center. “What it’s done, deep down, is polarise the whole national political agenda.

“If you look at the polls, the consequences of this level of polarisation have been the reinforcing of the parties most deeply involved in the issue.” Earlier on Monday, Rocío Monasterio, Vox’s leader in the Madrid region, headed to a centre for unaccompanied foreign minors in Seville to argue that such young people made the streets unsafe and posed "a serious problem in our neighbourhoods”. She was met with cries of “Fascists out!” The next day her husband, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, a Vox spokesman, suggested "foreigners are three times more likely to commit rape ... than Spaniards”.

He was speaking after Abascal falsely claimed in the debate that 70% of gang rapes in Spain were committed by foreigners. Official figures show that 312 Spaniards and 96 foreigners were convicted of rape last year.