



Civil rights and self-determination: a Catalan perspective

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Good afternoon,

Many thanks Doctor Carson for your presentation and the opportunity to introduce the Catalan case here at Stanford.

Why I am here today,

I am here because Catalonia is at a crossroads. These are grave times for us. With the existence of political prisoners, exiles, and hundreds of Catalans being investigated and judged, only truth and justice can be our way forward and our guide to freedom. This pursuit of freedom that is, at the end, the real way to understand Catalonia throughout its history.

A Catalan poet, Zoraida Burgos, said once that we must look for our roots in the mythical idea of peace and freedom. This is why the title of this conference is “Self-determination and Civil Rights: a Catalan perspective”. Because the exercise of our right to self-determination and defending civil rights is precisely our road, the Catalan path towards returning to this idea of peace and this idea of freedom.

And what is Catalonia some of you may wonder?

Catalonia is an old European nation, and its people is plural in their origins, in their languages, in their beliefs...it is certainly a society attached to its native language, culture, and tradition, but it strongly believes in the value of diversity and openness to the world, and at the same time it knows that if we lose our values, we lose everything.

I speak about a nation with a millennial history and culture. A nation that was free once and wants to be free again.

I talk to you all in the midst of the gravest situation Catalonia has faced since the death of General Franco. Last year we held a referendum of self-determination that was met with violence by the Spanish state.

A referendum, based on every people's right to self-determination according to international law and treaties. Around 2.3 million people voted, 90% of them did it for independence. Police violence could not stop them. Many of us, for the first time in our lives, had to face violence, but we resisted and peacefully defended our ballot boxes with our own bodies.



That day something new was born in Catalonia. Something from which there is no way back. Because you'll never retreat once you've been so close to freedom.

That referendum was made possible thanks to the commitment of our people, but also the commitment of our politicians, our government, and our social leaders.

Today we have 9 political prisoners, 9 exiles, among them President Carles Puigdemont, and hundreds of people investigated, unfairly accused by the judiciary and punished in various ways.

As President of Catalonia, I am proud of their courage. I am proud to be able to say that our leaders have shown themselves ready to pay a personal price for their ideas.

When I speak to you, I speak on behalf of a society that has seen how its human rights have been violated.

I speak on behalf of a solidary people that has understood that dignity is non-negotiable, that human rights are non-negotiable, that the rights that help our societies to advance cannot be suspended.

I speak on behalf of a people united in its defense of democracy, humanism and dignity and against intolerance and autocracy.

I want to tell you thus, that the future of Catalonia lies on its defense of civil rights and the principle of self-determination. And I will tell you, as well, that we shall overcome.

The Catalan pursuit of Freedom

The late Gene Sharpe said in one of his books: "Freedom is not something which rulers "give" their subjects. It is something achieved in the interaction between society and government".

Today Catalonia faces the most important of its challenges: the peaceful and non-violent struggle for freedom.

Freedom of speech. Freedom of conscience. Freedom of assembly. Freedom of demonstration. Freedom to have rights. The right to have right. Freedom to choose your destiny in a democratic way.

And what is today going on in Spain with all these freedoms? With all these rights?

Freedom of expression is now restricted in Spain. Rap singers go to prison and to exile for their lyrics, and even art exhibitions have been censored. Even Amnesty International has denounced this situation without any consequences.



Freedom of assembly is also questioned; thanks to an authoritarian gag law that even the New York Times has recently criticized in an editorial article.

Freedom as the right to have rights has been also affected and have been declared null or suspended. Laws on Climate Change, on universal health, on social services... all these laws have been suspended not because of their content, but because they had been approved by the Catalan Parliament.

I am talking about these essential freedoms because this aspiration is America's lasting legacy to the world.

During the last two hundred and forty years, the world has seen how this country strove towards the idea of freedom for all its citizens, and we hope that you will overcome the challenges ahead.

The Catalan people covet exactly the same aspiration as the other peoples of the world who want to live freely in peace and mutual respect, and who have chosen to live under these conditions no matter how hard their realization may be.

And we hope that the large consensus achieved among Catalan society will soon prevail.

Because the pro-independence movement is not only central to the current political debate in Catalonia, but also has the social majority in its demands as shown by the last two elections to the Catalan Parliament, that have confirmed its democratic mandate with an absolute majority for pro-independence forces.

Today, the three big points of consensus in Catalan society, supported by 80% of its population, are, first, that we don't want to live under an outdated monarchy, always under the suspicion of corruption, that, second, we don't tolerate political repression, exile, and the imprisonment of our leaders, and finally, third, also with 80% of support, that we want to exercise our right to self-determination, and that our will must be respected.

These three consensus: referendum, freedom from repression, and republicanism as a form of government, are fundamental for our future.

If Spain really is a democratic State, Spain should listen to the demands of the people of Catalonia. Spain should listen to Amnesty International and the World Organization Against Torture when they call for the release of our political prisoners. Spain should listen to the American PEN club. Spain should listen to the Canadian and American academies of political science. Spain should listen to Human Rights Watch when it says that on the first of October there was an excessive use of police violence. Spain should listen to the UN rapporteurs, it should listen to the Nobel Peace Prize winners that call for the end of repression. It should listen to all the democratic voices around the world that are calling for a political solution for a political problem. If Spain is democratic, it should allow the people of Catalonia to decide its freely future without people in prison, without people in exile. Without threats.



Because only by attaining our collective freedom can we protect and exercise our personal freedoms. In this time of troubles, we have understood that the defense of the civil rights of one single citizen means the defense of the civil rights of all of us. If they repress one of us, they repress us all. If they repress one of us, they repress us all.

To defend freedom, we must do everything within the scope of our power, in the sense in which Hannah Arendt defined power in opposition to force.

The struggle for freedom for Catalonia and for all its people is our goal, our commitment, and the mission of my government. However, freedom and justice are not free, there is a price to be paid in order to enjoy them. We know it and we are not afraid.

Catalonia as an open society

Catalonia is a nation open to its neighbors and to the world.

Since ancient times, human, cultural and trade exchanges have built our identity. We've always believed that openness is basic to success and even more today in a globalized world. We cannot ignore change.

As I said before, Catalonia is a very diverse society.

Today 70% of the Catalan population has at least one grandparent from outside Catalonia. Many were born outside the territorial bounds of Catalonia.

During the 20th and early 21st centuries, we have worked to integrate several waves of migrants.

Catalan society has been able to incorporate people from a wide diversity of origins and orient them towards a future of coexistence. This is the key to social cohesion. In Catalonia immigration is a realm of memory in Pierre Nora's sense, where people grow roots not in the past but in the future. This is yet another vision shared by Catalans and Americans.

This character of Catalonia as a host country and a space of shared struggles is a matter of pride for everyone, with more than 200 languages being spoken today in Catalonia. With this premise, it should not be surprising that there is a strong consensus on the welcoming of refugees, and Catalan families have volunteered in the past to host refugee children for extended periods.

Our identity drinks both from our traditions, including our language and culture, as much as from the will to build a better future together.

But lately an issue other than identity is gaining importance: emphasis on democracy and civil rights.



Repression has reinforced the democratic engagement of the Catalan people to the point that we are rethinking the role of government vis-à-vis democratic and civic movements.

The movement for self-determination is also a movement towards a greater empowerment of the people. A movement towards more and more participation.

We are determined to use the grave situation we live in to build a better country. A country that does not exclude anyone. A country that has economic prosperity, equal opportunity and social and environmental rights very close to its heart.

Self-determination: from President Wilson to Catalonia

It was an American President, Woodrow Wilson, who 100 years ago put the principle of self-determination on center stage in geopolitics. Since 1945 the West has been governed by rules-based institutions that under the uncontested lead of America have promoted trade liberalisation and democracy around the world.

Since 1945 global trade has multiplied by 12 and the number of independent states has gone from around 76 to 195. Old and oppressive empires have disappeared, decolonization took place, and freedom spread throughout the globe. Only in the last few decades, more than 1 billion people have escaped poverty thanks to the spread of globalization.

I said before that close to a hundred new independent states have been born during the last decades and full-speed globalization, but what I did not say is that many of these new states are small, or at least not as large as the old ones. And this is no coincidence.

Globalization, free markets, and the Western preference for democratic solutions to political conflicts are the reasons why it has become increasingly rational for small nations to have their own independent states.

Small nations no longer need to be part of a bigger state in order to access a larger market for its products, because the American-led commitment to free trade has greatly reduced tariffs and barriers to commerce.

Small nations are, on average, more prosperous than big ones. And more democratic and peaceful. As an independent nation, Catalonia's economic viability is absolutely certain.

This is the context in which our struggle becomes possible. Like every other people, Catalans have a right to self-determination, the right to decide their own future.

The struggle for self-determination is a long one, it did not start in 2017. Already in 1640 a Republic was proclaimed in Barcelona. Also in 1931 a Catalan Republic was proclaimed in parallel with the Spanish one.



Even here, in San Francisco, in the year 1945, under Franco's dictatorship, a group of Catalan exiles claimed for the right of Catalonia to its self-determination in the very same moment that the UN was founded.

And as we did again on the 1st of October of 2017 by conducting a referendum in the face of police violence. Regardless of how much repression the Spanish State applies to us, we will continue our non-violent struggle.

But now what is clear is that only an international mediation will convince the Spanish establishment that the political solution for Catalonia needs to be based on the democratic will of its people.

Only the power of international pressure will force the Spanish state to sit around the table and negotiate. International public opinion is going to be crucial in the next months.

In times of growing authoritarianism, defending the right to self-determination of Catalonia is in America's and in the West's geopolitical self-interest.

It is in America's own interest to defend those who defend political ideas by democratic means and to protect small nations and defend the principle of self-determination that is at the core of its own national existence.

As long as there are political prisoners, exiles, and the rights of the Catalan people continue to be denied, the door will remain wide open for authoritarian countries to feel justified in repressing their national minorities.

A Catalan independent state would be an example of how to resolve historical conflict in a democratic way, and would also be a partner in the effort to promote a more democratic world, a more American world.

Non-Violence and civil rights

President Bill Clinton once said in Barcelona that the world would be either Catalan or Taliban. With this phrase, President Clinton recognized the democratic, tolerant and open mindedness of the Catalan people. Its permanent choice of non-violence to defend its national rights.

He was right. And even though the struggle is not easy and the costs are high, we will succeed. Doctor Martin Luther King once said that "non-violent resistance is the most powerful weapon that oppressed people can use to change the world", and I agree with him.

Moreover, as the Stanford academic, Francis Fukuyama, says: "Liberal democracies stipulate that power must be exercised in conformity with civil and political rights. Accepting Human Rights is the best way to legitimize power".



Today Catalonia, as America did before, wants to achieve its right to statehood and to defend the civil rights of its people.

However, our non-violent struggle is long-standing and has adopted many forms.

The Catalan language is more than one thousand years old. Yet, it has been banned and persecuted repeatedly by the Spanish government over the last three centuries.

Our civil society has struggled, and continues to struggle, to normalize the Catalan language and culture.

Without the silent struggle of our parents and grandparents to preserve our identity and culture, today Catalonia would only be a geographic name.

Forty years after the end of the dictatorship, it is clear that Spain did not fully transition to democracy.

The police, the courts, the army, and a relevant part of the State's high-level officials, that is known as the deep state, never really evolved from the dictatorship, and many are the offspring of high-ranking Francoist officials. The present state in many ways preserves the power relations and attitudes of the Franco regime. We can't forget that the father of the king of Spain was promoted and designed successor by Generalísimo Franco himself.

Our social and political leaders have been imprisoned, unfairly, for a rebellion they never committed. They have been jailed for more than one year. One year without their families, without their friends, without freedom, and with their civil and political rights being violated.

But we have had enough, our political prisoners have rights. They have the right to be free, they have the right to have a fair trial. They have the right to international justice. They have the right to not be treated as criminals. We have had enough of the criminalization of a peaceful movement. We have had enough of the institutional violence used against our people. We have had enough violations of human rights. We have had enough of Madrid's denial of the legitimate right of Catalonia to self-determination. We have had enough of all this.

As Doctor Martin Luther King said, "we are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there "is" such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action".

And yes, the gravity of the Catalan situation, with a political trial that will begin soon against the legitimate representatives of the Catalan people, where all their civil rights have been violated, makes it high time for Catalan society to engage into vigorous and positive action.



As Jordi Cuixart, social leader and President of Omnium Cultural, and prisoner of the Spanish State for more than a year without trial, has said: as a movement, we must continue to engage in the non-violent methods of our struggle, to engage in civil disobedience and mobilization. And understand that this struggle will have a cost.

And so, today Catalonia sees how human, social and civil rights are impossible to separate from each other and from the right to self-determination. And this is why I call on the international community to act, to act with the fierce urgency of now and engage with an international mediation that allows the Catalan people to effectively recognise the exercise of our right to self-determination.

For all these reasons I am fully convinced that the Catalan people will not accept prison sentences for our social and political leaders. Non-cooperation with injustice is a moral obligation.

And the Catalan people should decide what to do: dignity or indignity and react accordingly. I am convinced that they will choose dignity.

As Catalans, we are faithful to the American and Western ideas of freedom, social and economic openness, and the non-violent defense of civil rights. All of them are ideas that will be judged during the trial for the Catalan referendum.

The US can look to Catalonia as an outpost of its own principles. The Western world cannot allow the suppression by force of a democratic movement like ours. Tolerating authoritarian methods only reinforces authoritarian states.

In a Spain in full democratic regression, the struggle for the Catalan Republic is the only way to get back our civil rights and our democracy.

Here in the United States, where you value the freedom and dignity of peoples, I want to proclaim with all my hope and conviction that the day will come when Catalonia will achieve statehood, and that will not be the end of our efforts but a new beginning.

Then we will have the greatest challenge of all: to build a new state based on the principles of freedom, justice, social cohesion, openness, self-determination and nonviolence. This is our path, the Catalan way, and we shall stick to these principles.

Quim Torra i Pla
President de la Generalitat de Catalunya