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Defiant separatist leaders reiterate call for Catalan independence

Catalonia's separatist leaders said independence from Spain was still their goal and another unauthorised referendum remained an option as supporters gathered yesterday for an annual march that has come to exemplify Catalan nationalism.

The independence drive has overshadowed Spanish politics for years and is now at a defining moment at a time when national politics themselves are in turmoil.

Massive annual marches have taken place on the region's commemorative day on Sept. 11 - known as the "Diada" - since 2012. At the same time, 12 Catalan leaders - nine of them jailed - are awaiting a verdict in their trial for rebellion, sedition and misappropriation of public funds over the independence referendum and the botched declaration that followed it.

"What the state intends with this sentence is to head a peaceful movement and, as it cannot detain

two million citizens, it locks us up," said Oriol Junqueras, 50, the jailed leader of the left-wing Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya party. Prosecutors are seeking sentences ranging from 7 to 25 years, the latter only for Junqueras. Asked if he would rule out acting unilaterally again on a referendum, Junqueras, answering questions from Reuters, said: "We cannot discard any option that is democratic and peaceful".

Another jailed separatist leader, Jordi Cuixart, said on Twitter: "We will never give up on being free."

"We'll do it again," he said, using what has become a separatist catchphrase referring to the 2017 referendum and independence declaration.

However, there are growing divisions among separatists on what the next steps should be.

One way or the other, the Supreme Court ruling, expected in the first half of October, is likely to mark a defining moment for a movement that triggered Spain's biggest political crisis in decades in 2017 and

still influences its national politics. Early yesterday close to 450,000 people were registered to take part in the Barcelona demonstration, about 10,000 people below last year's, said Assemblea Nacional Catalana, the grassroots organization behind the protest. Spanish and Catalan politicians yesterday showed their different expectations for the "Diada", the anniversary of the fall of Barcelona to Spanish forces in 1714.

Spain's acting Socialist prime minister Pedro Sanchez said that he hoped that one day, the "Diada" would not be a celebration of "only a part of Catalans", referring to separatists.

But Carles Puigdemont, the former Catalan head of government who fled to Belgium after the failed separatist bid, said: "Today we will show again to the world that we persist despite repression, that we have the right to live in peace and freedom, and that no one can decide for us our future," he tweeted yesterday.



SPAIN'S PODEMOS HINTS AT CONCESSIONS IN PM TALKS TO AVOID ELECTION

Madrid.—The leader of Spain's far-left Unidas Podemos called yesterday for a new round of government talks with the Socialist party of acting premier Pedro Sanchez to break a deadlock and avoid a new election.

"I again extend my hand to you," Pablo Iglesias said

during a parliamentary debate with Sanchez.

"You have made us an offer and we made a counteroffer. I suggest that based on these two offers we sit to negotiate."

He said "the Spanish citizenry would win" from a deal on forming a government, even if neither

party got exactly what it wanted. Sanchez responded that his party wanted a deal. "We are the last ones to want a new election," he said. "What we want is that Spain has a strong government."

The two parties said on Tuesday that talks, in which Podemos de-

manded cabinet posts in exchange for support, had reached a dead-end. If they fail to agree on forming a government by Sept. 23, a new election would be held on Nov. 10.

The Socialists want Podemos to back them without being in the cabinet, which Podemos rejects.

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