

## COMMENTARY



Attendees at a concert organized by the pro-independence Catalan National Assembly at the Olympic stadium in Barcelona this month.

Credit: Javier Barbancho / Reuters

By Albert Rivera

# We Catalans owe the world an explanation

**Many readers** probably have a cursory notion of the recent turmoil plaguing the autonomous Spanish region of Catalonia. They will have seen large demonstrations by both separatists and unionists. They may know, too, that following the illegal referendum on independence, Catalan separatist politicians, with 47% of the votes and a majority in the Catalan Parliament, decided to suspend the laws concerning the region's relationship with the central government. They then fraudulently approved a transitory constitution and an act calling for an illegal plebiscite on a plan for secession.

Weeks later, the regional president, Carles Puigdemont, declared unilateral independence, forcing the Spanish government to intervene to restore constitutional order and to schedule regional elections. Puigdemont, now deposed, fled the country and is in Belgium trying to rally support from other European countries, while Spain has issued an international warrant for his arrest. Aware that no European country will support his demands, last week he said that Catalans should decide if their region should leave the European Union.

Readers probably do not, however, have a clear understanding of how this has come to pass in a prosperous European democracy known for its freedom, tolerance and largely self-governed autonomous regions. We Catalans owe the world an explanation.

I was born in Barcelona in 1979. My father is Catalan, the son of a family of merchants, and my mother was born in Andalusia to a humble and hard-working family. In the early 1970s, like millions of Andalusians, they moved to Catalonia in search of opportunities and to pursue their dreams. My parents met in Barcelona, where they married.

In 1989, they started their own business, which allowed them to live comfortably. Three years ago, the economic crisis drowned the family company, and today my mother and aunt raise

every day the shutter on a smaller homemade food venture. In recent weeks, my parents' business has suffered attacks by separatist radicals.

Origin and socioeconomic status are the variables that best explain secessionism in my region: The higher the income and deeper the Catalan roots, the greater the separatist support; the lower the income, particularly among those with strong links to the rest of Spain, the greater the preference for a united Spain. This turns Catalan nationalism, traditionally conservative and oligarchic, into a movement through which those who have more want to emancipate themselves from the rest.

It's not trivial that a Catalan like me should have the honour of being a candidate for prime minister of Spain, a fact that contrasts with the Francoist and repressive caricature that the separatists try to sell of Spain. In fact, the Spanish Constitution, approved in 1978, was endorsed with 91% support in Catalonia, and two of the seven founders of the Constitution were Catalans.

In 1979 Spain was a young constitutional monarchy seeking integration with Western Europe. Today it is one of the most important economies of the European Union, as well as one of the most decentralized countries with the highest standards of democracy, freedom and social welfare rates in the world.

But in Catalonia we are facing a serious social fracture. Catalan nationalism has grown notably in recent years, spurred by a decade-long economic crisis and corruption scandals that have generated mistrust in political institutions. The separatist movement parallels populist movements in other Western countries in response to globalization and its economic and political challenges: "Subsidized Spain lives at the expense of productive Catalonia" read an electoral poster from Puigdemont's political party; separatists also

employ an even blunter slogan, "Spain robs us." Still, Catalan separatists have been very smart. The movement has taken the old exclusionary nationalism, founded on the thesis of a cultural, economic and linguistic difference, and rebranded itself as peace-loving and democratic.

Behind this makeover a sense of supremacy defines this movement. It is seen in the use over the past three decades of propaganda in the public media and in the education system, which has been used as a brainwashing machine for the separatist movement started five years ago.

All this has been exacerbated by both Socialist and conservative governments in Madrid. To obtain the support of the nationalist parties in the Spanish Congress of Deputies, they gradually ceded privileges and authority to the nationalist governments in Catalonia without supervision or coordination.

Catalan nationalists have also persistently promoted the idea of a referendum. Those of us opposed to the plebiscite believe that not all democratic principles can be put to popular vote. Civil rights are not negotiable. Millions of Catalans cannot be deprived of their Spanish and European citizenship while national sovereignty is dissolved, and with it the right of all Spaniards to decide together on the future of Spain.

On occasion, the federal government of the United States has also had to intervene to safeguard the rights of minority groups who have been trampled underfoot. President John F. Kennedy said in 1962, also in a context of disobedience and rights violations by local government, that citizens are "free to disagree with the law, but not to disobey it," and that, in a country where the courts and the Constitution are challenged, "no law would stand free from doubt, no judge would be sure of his writ, and no citizen would be safe from his neighbours."

This is what is happening in Catalonia. Separatist leaders would replace

the Constitution with arbitrariness; judges are being pressured for doing their jobs; the social climate has deteriorated to the point of dividing families and friends. Political instability has also led to the exodus of thousands of businesses and a loss of tourism in Barcelona, one of the world's most attractive cities.

Fortunately, the Constitution allows the national government to hold democratic elections on December 21. We Catalans will be able to vote in legal regional elections to put an end to this madness. Never before has a regional government done so much economic, social and moral damage to Catalonia as it has with Puigdemont and the deposed vice president Oriol Junqueras at the helm.

Ciudadanos, the party I preside over, began from a Catalan civil movement representing a majority of Catalans silenced by Catalan nationalism. Today we are the leading opposition party in Catalonia, and a national and European party aspiring to govern Spain.

As most Spaniards do, a majority of Catalans want to participate in a common project for the future of Spain.

I cannot resign myself to seeing an isolated Catalonia in a globalized world, nor can I resign myself to seeing more borders in the era of open societies.

Faced with those who promote rupture, I demand dialogue. Faced with exclusion, I ask for coexistence; federalism and union, not provincialism and division; the rule of law, not arbitrariness; and pluralism and freedom against dogma and imposition.

I was born in Barcelona. Catalonia is my homeland, Spain is my country, and Europe is our future.

*Albert Rivera is the president of the Ciudadanos party and a candidate for prime minister of Spain. This article originally appeared on [nytimes.com](#)*

By Mia Swart

# Why signs for transitional justice in Zimbabwe don't look promising

**When the first** reports appeared of military tanks approaching Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, questions started flooding my mind: would this mean a transition in power? And would it be a transition of the kind regarded as "model" transitions – transition from dictatorship to democracy?

Ever since it became clear that Emmerson Mnangagwa would be inaugurated as the next president, there are fears that the country wouldn't go through a genuine transition, that one dictator might simply replace another as was the case in Egypt.

Transitional justice is a term coined by the scholar Ruti Teitel in 1990. She defined it as a form of justice that could address the legacy of human rights violations and violence during a society's transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one. Transitional justice refers to the ways in which countries emerging from periods of conflict and repression address large scale human rights violations so numerous and serious that the normal justice system is unable to provide an adequate response.

Transitional justice has become a vital part of modern peace building efforts alongside disarmament, security sector reform and elections. The United Nations views it as the full range of processes associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of

large-scale past abuses with a view to ensuring accountability, serving justice and achieving reconciliation.

It encompasses issues such as whether the perpetrators of serious human rights violations under a previous regime should be prosecuted or pardoned. It also involves looking at reparations, institutional reform, public recognition of violations and whether and how investigations should be initiated to uncover the truth about past violations.

It's still unclear whether Zimbabwe will manage an effective transition to participatory democracy and freedom. But the current signs are not encouraging.

After three decades of state sponsored violence, there is an acute need to break the culture of impunity that has become entrenched in Zimbabwe. The steady erosion of human and political rights has further led to a lack of faith in the rule of law.

Early excitement about prospects of transitional justice in Zimbabwe has already been dampened by the agreement struck between the military and the outgoing president. The deal entails exempting Robert Mugabe from prosecution for crimes committed during his 37 years in office. The immunity deal reportedly covers numerous members of Mugabe's extended family, including his stepson and nephews. It

may also include senior ruling party officials detained by the military as well as those who are currently overseas.

This immunity agreement creates grave doubts about the legitimacy of the foundation on which the new Zimbabwe will be built.

It's clear that the agreement violates international law. Under Mugabe's rule opposition supporters suffered harassment, intimidation, forced removal and death. Crimes against humanity were also committed. There are also strong allegations that Mugabe ordered his opponents to be tortured. International law holds that to be guilty of torture, it isn't necessary that a person should have directly participated in torture. Ordering torture is sufficient to warrant conviction.

There are other reasons to doubt whether Zimbabwe's new leadership is interested in pursuing transitional justice. For example, would they be prepared to look back at post-independence crimes such as the Gukurahundi massacre in Matabeleland that claimed the lives of 20 000 people? Given Mnangagwa's prominent role in this massacre it's highly unlikely that official attempts will be undertaken to uncover the truth of this massacre.

Measured against the South African transition, it is already clear that the "transition in Zimbabwe" is imperfect. This is because it lacks democratic le-

gitimacy. Unlike the wave of transitions from socialism to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s the Zimbabwean transition, at this stage, does not look as if it has the potential to truly liberate Zimbabwean citizens and to convey them into a state in which human rights are supreme.

Former Zimbabwe finance minister and opposition party member Tendai Biti said in a recent interview with South Africa's Sunday Times that there was no point in prosecuting Mugabe. He said: "We cannot let the past continue to hold the future, and Mugabe is in the past... He must be given the right of free passage."

But Mugabe does not deserve a "right of free passage." To award him this right would be to make a mockery of the principles of international law, transitional justice and the ongoing suffering of millions of Zimbabweans.

Biti emphasised the importance of economic growth and transformation. As a former finance minister he should know that financial prosperity cannot be separated from social cohesion and respect for the rule of law.

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the  
Globalist

By James M. Dorsey

## Transition in the Middle East

# Transition to What?

**Transition** is the name of the game in the Middle East and North Africa. The question is transition to what?

Dominating the answer is an Arab autocratic push for a Saudi-led regional order that would be based on an upgraded 21st Century version of autocracy designed to fortify absolute rule.

To achieve that, autocrats have embraced economic reform accompanied by necessary social change that would allow them to efficiently deliver public goods and services.

It is an approach that rejects recognition of basic freedoms and political rights and is likely to produce more open and inclusive political systems that ensure that all segments of society have a stake. At the core of the volatile and often brutal and bloody battle that could take up to a quarter of a century is the determination of Arab autocrats to guarantee their survival at whatever cost. Geopolitics plays a major role in Arabic autocratic ambition. To compensate for their inherent weakness and lack of the building blocks needed for sustainable regional dominance, Arab autocrats (except for Egypt, the one Arab state with the potential of being a dominant, long-term regional player) need to contain first and foremost Iran, and to a lesser degree Turkey.

It is a geopolitical struggle, dominated by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has enveloped the Middle East and North Africa for almost four decades and progressively undermined regional stability.

This has fuelled the rise of extremism and jihadism. It has also encouraged supremacist, intolerant and anti-pluralistic tendencies far beyond its borders in countries like Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. And it is also what has turned it into the most volatile, repressive and bloody part of the world.

Littered with the bodies of the dead and the dying, countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen have been scarred for generations to come. They are struggling to ensure territorial integrity against potential secessionist ethnic, regional and religious challenges.

Possible US-backed Saudi efforts to destabilize Iran with attempts to stir ethnic unrest carry the clear risk of the Islamic republic and Pakistan becoming the next victims. Countries such as Lebanon already teeter on the brink.

Restive populations hang in the balance, hoping that their continued surrender of political rights in new social contracts unilaterally drafted by autocratic leaders will bring them greater economic opportunity.

In some countries like Egypt, expectations have been dashed. In others such as Saudi Arabia, expectations are unrealistic and poorly, if at all, managed. The successful and brutal Saudi and UAE-led counterrevolution has killed hopes and popular energy that exploded onto the streets of the Arab cities during the revolts of 2011 and produced tyrants and mayhem.

For now, it has all but erased popular will to risk challenging autocratic rule that has failed to deliver or that has created expectations that may prove difficult to meet.

Autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa are, for now, riding high. They are buffeted by five potent factors on the ground.

First, the ability to divert public attention with promises of economic change. Second, the specter of Iran as a foreign threat. Third, US support for regional autocrats and, fourth, the related containment of Iran. The fifth factor is the fuelling of ethnic and sectarian tension.

At best, that strategy buys Arab autocrats time. The risk is festering and new wounds that are likely to come to haunt them. Four decades of global Saudi propagation of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism has turned Arab Shiites and their militias into potent political and military forces.

The spectre of the Houthis organizing themselves on the border of Saudi Arabia on the model of Lebanon's Hezbollah is but the latest example.

Autocratic self-preservation and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, coupled with disastrous US policies, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq, have wracked countries across the region.

This has fostered a generation of Syrians and Yemenis that is likely to be consumed by anger and frustration with their human suffering.

Equally troubling, this translates at best into a slow rebuilding of their shattered countries. After all, the very existence of these countries in their current form and borders is quite uncertain.

In short, transition, in the Middle East and North Africa has deteriorated into a battle for retention of political control. It constitutes a struggle for the future of the region.

With near certainty, it will produce more conflict as well as black swans that could create even more havoc long before it yields sustainable solutions. The transition towards equitable economic development and transparent and accountable rule of law will take a very long time.

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