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EUROPE

‘Be Water’: Catalonia Separatists Ride Hong Kong Protesters’ Wave

Demonstrators embrace tactics pro-democracy activists have utilized; umbrellas, airport occupation and high-tech coordination



Demonstrators hold banners at a sit-in protest outside Catalonia government headquarters in Barcelona on Monday. PHOTO: TONI ALBIR/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Margherita Stancati

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BARCELONA—Activists here in Spain’s Catalan region have watched and learned as pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong have defied authorities and taken to the streets to press their demands.

Organizers of the demonstrations in favor of Catalan independence that swept the region over the past week have adopted the Hong Kong movement’s slogan—“Be water.”

It is a reference to the fighting philosophy of Kung Fu legend Bruce Lee, intended to encourage followers to move quickly and fluidly to occupy public spaces, draw attention to their cause and then recede to reappear again somewhere else.

Some Catalan separatists have marched with umbrellas, again following the lead of their Hong Kong counterparts. They occupied Barcelona's international airport—forcing the cancellation of hundreds of flights— and they have used masks to conceal their identities from police.

Other groups around the world have taken inspiration from the Hong Kong protesters and are mimicking their tactics as well.

In London, for instance, Extinction Rebellion environmental activists developed a sign language based on that used by Hong Kong demonstrators to outwit police during weeks of demonstrations in the British capital and tried to disrupt trains and flights.

Catalonia, home to a long-running separatist movement, has its own history of largely peaceful mass mobilization. But the sentencing last week of nine Catalan political leaders for their involvement in an illegal 2017 independence referendum precipitated a new, more violent and disruptive phase of the struggle.

Since the Supreme Court verdict and sentencing, Catalans have taken to the streets daily. Inspired by their Hong Kong counterparts, they have turned to technology to mobilize in mass in different parts of Barcelona, the regional capital, coordinating their activities through messaging apps such as Telegram.

“What’s happening in Hong Kong is an example, and people are learning from that experience,” said Elisenda Paluzie, the leader of Catalan National Assembly, an established separatist political movement. Her group—which recently held a workshop for supporters called “New technologies in the nonviolent struggle: the case of Hong Kong”— helped coordinate large-scale marches on Friday that saw more than 500,000 people stream into Barcelona, paralyzing much of the city.

The jailing of the independence leaders has revived tensions between separatists and Madrid, which reached a boiling point with the unilateral declaration of independence that followed the 2017 referendum. The turmoil in Catalonia has become a priority for the government of acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez ahead of parliamentary elections in November.

Catalonia, Spain's wealthiest region, enjoys a significant degree of autonomy in areas including education and law enforcement. While Mr. Sánchez has defended the right to demonstrate peacefully, he has rebuffed calls Catalonia's pro-separatist leader to start a new political dialogue on self-determination. During a brief trip to Barcelona on Monday to meet injured police officers, Mr. Sánchez refused to meet the regional chief, Quim Torra, on the grounds he didn't condemn the violence forcefully enough.



Acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and acting Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska leave the National Police headquarters in Barcelona on Monday. The turmoil in Catalonia has become a priority for the government ahead of parliamentary elections in November. PHOTO: JON NAZCA/REUTERS

The latest unrest has been marked by acts of violence and vandalism, once rare among pro-independence activists.

Peaceful gatherings have turned aggressive in the evenings, with riot police and protesters clashing almost daily. Nearly 600 people on both sides have been injured, and close to 200 detained.

Catalan activists began paying closer attention to Hong Kong this summer, as demonstrations against a bill that would have allowed extradition to China broadened into a pro-democracy movement that has tested Beijing's grip on the city.

During evening rallies in Barcelona, activists handed out a pamphlet on self-defense called "Hong Kong: the tactics of protesters," instructing demonstrators to equip themselves with helmets, protective eye masks and fireproof gloves to throw tear-gas grenades back at police.

New groups partly inspired by Hong Kong—such as Tsunami Democràtic, the group behind the airport occupation—began to emerge in Catalonia in recent months, operating without known leaders and instead relying on social media to coordinate and mobilize quickly on a large scale.

When the crowd near a border crossing with France was thinning, activists launched an appeal for reinforcements on Twitter and Telegram: They needed more people to ensure the highway remained closed to traffic.

The response was swift, with reinforcements swelling the number of protesters in the area and buttressing their makeshift barricades.



A Catalan demonstrator wearing the separatist flag stands in front of Barcelona's Sagrada Familia during a general strike last Friday. PHOTO: ALBERT GEA/REUTERS

Another recently formed Catalan group, called *Pícnic per la República*, has drawn heavily from the Hong Kong example, inviting supporters to follow their most popular Telegram channels for inspiration. They were particularly impressed by their use of an app—called *HKmap.live*—that crowdsources and maps the location of police and antigovernment demonstrators. So impressed, in fact, that *Pícnic per la República* is now replicating it for Catalonia.

“Hong Kong was impressive for everybody,” said one pro-independence Catalan activist, a leading member of *Pícnic per la República*. “They did an excellent job at internationalizing their fight.”

That is a lesson his group recently put into practice. To draw outside attention to their cause, on Friday they organized a mass gathering at Barcelona's most famed monument—Antoni Gaudí's Sagrada Família—forcing the basilica to temporarily close.

The parallel with Hong Kong also serves another purpose: portraying Spain, a European democracy, as a China-like authoritarian regime bent on suppressing democracy. It is a parallel Mr. Torra, the Catalan president, rejects, even as he remains critical of Madrid's approach to the crisis.

“What we ask the Spanish government is to find a political solution to be able to give a response to the Catalan people,” Mr. Torra said in an interview. “Hong Kong can't be compared to us....We have to find our own way, democratic and peaceful, for Catalan society to express itself.”

—*Pietro Lombardi contributed to this article.*

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