

## **Cleaning up City Squares in Democratic Spain**

*By Pablo Ouziel*

On Friday the 27th of May, five days after an overwhelming victory by centre-right political parties in the local and regional elections across Spain, the country woke up to the bitter reality of how nonviolent movements calling for economic democracy, political justice and peace are going to be dealt with by the country's police forces in this new era of right-wing political dominance.

Just twenty-four hours after Spain's largest telecom company, Telefonica, announced a new round of layoffs affecting 8500 people, 25% of the work force, and as the G8 is meeting in Deauville, France, to discuss amongst other things the discontent sweeping across Europe, the Catalan police force – the Mossos d'Esquadra – following orders from the Town Hall's new Catalan Nationalist Party (CiU) government, surrounded the nonviolent citizens camped at the Plaza Catalunya in Barcelona's city centre. Armed with full riot gear, batons and machine-guns with rubber bullets, the police kettled in the protestors, making it impossible for them to leave or others to enter.

With the excuse of cleaning up the square for safety reasons, in preparation for tomorrow's Champions League soccer final between Barcelona and Manchester United, the city government called for the dispersal of the crowds in order to allow for clean up teams to enter. Although this was the official stance, it soon became apparent that cleaning garbage from the square was not the true intent, and that the real aim of the operation was to seize computers, printers and documents from the movement's steering committees, and to put an end to this popular uprising which is posing a threat to the country's political and economic elites.

As soon as the police surrounded the crowds and the news aired on local television stations and radios, citizens from across the city began to leave their work places and made their way to the square in order to show their solidarity with those being harassed by the police. The scene they encountered resembled one of Gandhi's legendary acts of civil disobedience – the demonstrators sitting on the floor, in silence, with their legs crossed and hands up in the air; symbolizing their defiance to the oppressive and brutal nature of this unannounced police action.

Unlike during pre-election campaigning time, eleven days ago, when the 15M Movement began to congregate in city squares across the country with shouts of indignation, this time the police did not hesitate, the orders were clear. The police began to point their guns at those outside the square that were shouting "This is our democracy", and one by one they began to pull those sitting down inside the square – beating them with their batons. I have just heard that economics professor Arcadi Oliveras (Spain's Noam Chomsky), was amongst those on the receiving end of the police's indiscriminate use of batons.

At the time of writing, thousands of citizens are making their way to the square in Barcelona, and following two arrests and 99 injured, around 5000 protestors have already reclaimed the city square. In Madrid Esperanza Aguirre, who presides over the autonomous region and who also heads Madrid's Partido Popular, has asked the ministry of the Interior to evict the protestors at the Puerta del Sol. On their part, the protestors at Madrid's plaza have sent messages of solidarity to those being attacked

in Barcelona. The police force in the city of Lerida has also evicted the crowds camped in the city square using water canons, and two protesters have been arrested. While in the city of Granada, the town hall is in negotiations with the central government about how to empty the city's square.

The ambience in Barcelona's plaza is now jovial, once the city showed its support to the protestors, the police was forced to leave, and despite the fact that they have confiscated many laptops and pamphlets, and have destroyed tents and equipment, which the protestors have been using for their popular assemblies, people intend to stay. A large banner in the middle of the square reads in Spanish: "You have cleaned up our exhaustion and now we are back"

Despite the fact that the political elites in Spain, in this new era of right-wing dominance are showing their mass use of force, they have encountered a well-organized nonviolent movement. If the movement holds to its principles, and other European countries join in the struggle, it will be the European Union which will be forced to restrain this police brutality, and which will eventually have to make concessions to this democratic citizens fighting non-violently for change. If the movement spreads, as many signs already seem to indicate, European political and economic elites will have to decide between reform and revolution.

*Pablo Ouziel's articles and essays are available at [pabloouziel.com](http://pabloouziel.com)*