



Catalan voters back secession parties in Spain

By Rachael Brown

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PHOTO: The Convergence and Union alliance won a majority, but its share of parliamentary seats plunged from 62 to 50. (Reuters: Gustau Nacarino)

Parties vowing a referendum on self rule for Catalonia have won massive backing in elections in Spain's north-east.

However, the region's pro-independence leader, Artur Mas - whose party had hoped for an

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absolute majority in the 135-seat Catalan parliament - will have to share power.

Mr Mas's centre-right Convergence and Union alliance (CiU) won the vote, but its share of the parliamentary seats plunged to 50 from 62.

Left-wing nationalists, the ERC, surged to 21 seats from 10, official results showed, with nearly all votes counted.

"We are clearly the only force that can lead this government, but we cannot lead it alone. We need shared responsibility," Mr Mas told supporters in Barcelona.

"The presidency must be taken up, but we will also have to reflect along with other forces."

Mr Mas had vowed to hold a referendum on "self-determination" if Sunday's vote gave him a strong mandate.

Despite his party's loss of seats, the result could still set Catalonia up for a clash with Spain's central government.

Before the election, Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy said a referendum on independence would be illegal under the country's constitution.

The prime minister, along with many Spaniards, fear any sign of social division now will further strain Spain's already precarious position in the eurozone.

If a vote on secession is to go ahead, Mr Mas will have to find a way forward with rival parties that share his desire for a referendum, but not his political objectives.

The prospect of a break-up of Spain has overwhelmed debate about the region's sky-high public debt, savage spending cuts, unemployment and recession.

Catalonia, which traces its origins back more than a millennium, is proud of its language and culture, both of which were suppressed under the rule of General Francisco Franco, who died in 1975.

Mr Mas, like many Catalans, accuses Madrid of raising far more in taxes from the region than it returns, and estimates the gap, or fiscal deficit, at 16 billion euros (\$19.8 billion) a year - a figure Madrid disputes.

The region of 7.5 million people accounts for more than one-fifth of Spain's economic output and a quarter of its exports, and boasts one of the world's best football teams, Barcelona FC.

But Catalonia also has a 44-billion-euro (\$54.57 billion) debt, equal to one-fifth of its output, and was forced to turn to Madrid this year for more than five billion euros to help make the payments.

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