

Fear and Loathing in Catalunya

*"We cannot avoid politics, that's why I had to mix in a bit."
– Johan Cruyff.*

Devotees of the beautiful game, all over the world, were shocked to see a football match being played in an empty stadium. The first day of October was a dark day in the history of Catalunya (the Catalan term for Catalonia), as Futbol Club Barcelona were forced to host Las Palmas (a competitive team in the Primera Division) at the Camp Nou during a time of political unrest. The Blaugrana were forced to play football while thousands of Catalans were being assaulted by Spanish policemen, the Guardia Civil, who were sent by the State to prevent the referendum from successfully taking place.



An empty Camp Nou on Sunday.

It was a day democracy lost. A fascist plague took over the state of Catalunya and seemingly devoured everything in its path. Police brutality ensued throughout the day as voters were constantly being arrested. The symbols of electoral democracy – ballot boxes – were seized by these police troops, emptied, and taken away, right in front of the peaceful Catalans, who only wished to have their voices heard.

This Bloody Sunday of the 21st Century emanated from a just cause – the collective Catalan desire to be dissociated from their suppressors, the Spanish State, and develop an independent socialist state on their own. This stemmed from the universal right to self-determination, and though deemed illegal by the Spanish Government, showed no sign of

succumbing to pressure from the state. As dawn broke, more and more people gathered at designated polling stations, chanting "Votarem, Votarem!" ("We will vote!").



Police brutality during the referendum.

In times like these, one is taken back to the fascist era of Spain, when Francisco Franco ruled Spain as a military dictator. He ruled with an iron fist and made his distaste for the left-leaning citizens of Catalunya, a state that has fought its way towards independence for decades, clearly known. Underlining the constitution of Spain, which was carved out by Franco, is a shameful, purposeful amnesia, one that ignores the suffering of Catalunya during the brutal 1930s civil war and the suppression of the Catalan language.



Johan Cruyff going up against Franco's cronies.

This immense subjugation was well mirrored in the footballing world too. It is often claimed that Real Madrid was the dictator's team, benefitting greatly from this preferential treatment, both in Spain and in Europe as the most successful football club of all time. Despite all this, Barcelona has been the heart of a revolution to overthrow this tyranny and has garnered support from the international community. Being a vocal rebel has not been easy for the Catalans as political suppression and bias ensued for years, especially in the 1970s, when Johan Cruyff spoke out against the state for impoverishing those they do not favour. While most of us believe that this tumultuous era of oppression and violence is long gone, ripples have been seen recently in the political spectrum, most notably the violence that ensued on Sunday.

Spain has been governed by right-wing forces for decades. A major disparity occurs when the characterisation of Catalunya is done – which divides politically aware citizens into two. Firstly, we characterise Spain as a basket of fruits and Catalunya as a rotten apple that looks horrendous and gives the entire basket a bad name. Catalans are vermin and it is the burden of the state to try and fix their shunted ideology, albeit by force. A second viewpoint is the visualisation of Catalunya as the one fresh fruit in a basket of stale ones. It is arguable that, in this paradigm, the fresh fruit be kept in another basket with other fresh fruits, so that it does not go stale itself. This dissociation from a basket of stale fruits is the core premise of the Catalan revolution – the desire to overthrow a corrupt Centre or establish oneself as a separate state.



Politics and FC Barcelona go hand-in-hand.

Albeit an illegal referendum, the 90 to 10 vote in favour of an independent Catalan state will surely send a message to the Central Government – that democracy won the battle despite

immense police brutality and daylight violence. The politically aware may argue that the struggle for independence was simply a whim and the Catalans will crumble under the pressure of having to develop a new state. While this is true in most cases, Catalunya is at an opposite pole with the rest of Spain, when it comes to ideology; that of socialism where the voice of the people matters the most.

Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed. It was obvious that Spain termed this referendum as illegal for its own benefit. Catalunya has been, is, and will continue to be toyed with by Madrid. The power to control has obliterated many a rebellion in the past, but the ones that manage to overcome waves of oppression and subjugation go down in history books as successful attempts to overthrow a hierarchy of seemingly corrupt individuals. Catalans bled for this freedom because they believed in the virtue of the referendum. Catalans bled for this freedom because they wished for nothing more than peace and prosperity in their own state, for this generation and for those to come.

“It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.” – Charles Dickens.