

Morocco claims Ceuta and Melilla

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4 September 1999

Moroccan Prime Minister Abderraman Yusufi has questioned the status of the two Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Mellila and claimed them for Morocco.

He made this claim following regional elections on June 19 marked by vigorous political disputes. On August 13 Yusufi explained to the Spanish radio station Cadena SER that he would conduct bilateral negotiations in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, with the aim of achieving a more flexible status for the two cities. He cited as a model the "de-colonisation" of Hong Kong and Macao. At the same time he said the present state of affairs could not be allowed to continue.

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, who arrived in Rabbat on August 16 for a state visit, replied that that Ceuta and Melilla were not colonies, were in the best of health now and would remain so in the future. He said a discussion over the two cities was not at all called for.

The stance of Aznar, who is the leader of the conservative Peoples Party (PP), is supported by his rival Joaquin Almunia of the Socialist Party (PSOE).

Almunia supported Aznar's visit to Morocco and praised his "political astuteness". Declaring the visit must lead to an improvement in economic co-operation, he said Morocco's decision to restrict Spanish fishing rights in Morocco's territorial waters had to be revised. He added that efforts of Morocco's social democratic prime minister and newly crowned head of state Mohamed VI to democratise the North African country also had to be supported.

As to the status of Ceutas and Melilla, Almunia said there was nothing to discuss. Disputes over this issue, he continued, should be conducted in a spirit of dialogue, not confrontation.

While representatives of the PP and the PSOE indulge in diplomatic semantics in order to defend Spanish interests in North Africa, the left-wing alliance *Izquierda Unida* (IU) has intervened in the debate with a

considerable dose of patriotism. It declared that Aznar should have called off the visit to Rabbat because of "massive interference" by Yusufi. The parliamentary spokesman of this coalition, Felipe Alcaraz, called the politics of Aznar unworldly and added, "The relationship with Morocco has to be clarified and the trip is taking place at an inappropriate time".

While the political establishment in Spain agrees there is nothing to negotiate concerning Ceuta and Mellila, the issue dominates the Moroccan press. A leading article in the paper *Le Matin*, which sympathises with the government, said the essence of the matter is the initiation of a new stage in the bilateral relationship of the two countries. It described the status of the two cities as a colonial anachronism and said one should expect Spain to acknowledge the occupied cities of Ceuta and Melilla, as well as the Moroccan islands in the Mediterranean, to be colonies, which should be de-colonised. Sooner or later, it declared, they must be reintegrated with the Moroccan motherland.

The paper *L'Opinion*, which is close to the party of Yusufi, pointed to a parliamentary question that is to be raised in the Spanish legislature by the *Iniciativa per Catalunya-Els Verds* (IC) (Catalan Greens) in September, supporting the transfer of all rights on Ceutas and Melilla to Morocco.

On this issue the Catalan Greens are in agreement with Jordi Pujol, the leader of the nationalist-Catalan party *Convergencia i Unio* (CIU), which support Aznar's government. The CIU is in favour of a debate on the status of the two Moroccan cities, and Pujol himself had called for a "fundamental re-thinking" of the question.

The Catalan regional party *Esquerra Republicana* (Republican Left) declares that the Spanish state must begin the process of de-colonising Ceuta and Melilla, and, following a period of mutual Hispano-Moroccan sovereignty, allow them to be reintegrated into the

Moroccan state.

What is the significance of these two enclaves?

Ceuta and Melilla each have a population of about 70,000 of which 85 percent are of Spanish origin and 10 percent are Muslim. A harbour, a considerable fish processing industry and a few shipyards are the main workplaces in Ceuta. Their significance is bound up with their geographical location: Ceuta lies on the eastern entry of the strait of Gibraltar and thereby assumes military-strategic importance. In the summer of 1936 Franco and his Falangist troops crossed over to Spain from this location.

Ceuta is the destination for thousands of refugees from the whole of Africa, who attempt to make a safe crossing in order to migrate to Spain and the European Union. Since the Spanish government fortified its southern frontier and secured it with military forces, hardly a day passes without news of stranded or arrested refugees trying to reach the Spanish mainland in boats that are not seaworthy. Immigrants' associations estimate that in this area of the Mediterranean many thousands of people have already died while attempting to escape. Victims report that refugees who are picked up alive by the Spanish Guardia Civil are often harassed, beaten, robbed and immediately sent back to Morocco.

Under these circumstances the escape route via Ceuta is less dangerous. The authorities in the enclaves have reacted to this fact by building a high-tech wall around both Ceuta and Melilla and reinforcing the Guardia Civil.

The partial support of Moroccan demands by the Catalan nationalists, and the growing influence of regionalist forces in Aragon, the Balearic Islands and the Basque Region, show that it will become increasingly difficult for the PP and PSOE establishment to retain the unity of the Spanish nation-state.



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