

Spain marks 25th anniversary of democratic transition

Paul Mitchell

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Twenty five years after Spain's transition to democracy and the creation of a constitution, celebrations of the end of the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco have been decidedly muted.

In the media, discussion of the anniversary was overshadowed by reports of how the Spanish government blocked the creation of a European Union constitution. What discussion there was about Spain's own constitution revolved around changes proposed by the opposition Socialist Party (PSOE) to allow female monarchs—prompted by the recent engagement of Crown Prince Felipe to former television journalist Letizia Ortiz.

In its piece marking the anniversary, the liberal *El Pais* claimed that 63.9 percent of Spaniards believed the constitution had been a “good instrument for co-existence.” The newspaper said the constitution was an important “guarantor of freedom,” recognising as it does the right to regional autonomy, establishing the monarchy and limiting the powers of government.

It was on December 5, 1978, that a constitution was introduced—three years after the death of Franco.

The last years of Franco's life were marked by the political strivings of the working class to settle accounts with the dictatorship and student rebellions. Franco was forced to proclaim a state of emergency in 1969 and suspend freedom of expression and assembly. During his remaining years he introduced more repressive measures as opposition within the working class intensified.

Opposition to the regime in the 1970s also came from the Basque nationalist group, ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Fatherland and Freedom). In December 1973, the ETA assassinated Prime Minister Luis Carrero Blanco, whom Franco had personally appointed.

During 1975, strikes involving every section of the working class had spread across the country. Universities were in a state of turmoil and the Basque region was under martial law.

By the time of Franco's death on November 20, 1975, Spain was in crisis. As the United States Library of Congress notes somewhat dryly, “At the time of Franco's death, change appeared inevitable. The form that the change would take and the extent to which it could be controlled were less certain.”

In this atmosphere the official parties set up a committee that worked in secret to draw up a constitution that would prevent a social explosion that could threaten the survival of Spanish capitalism. The committee comprised three members from Adolfo Suárez's Christian Democratic Union (UCD), one member each from the PSOE, the Communist Party (PCE) and the Francoist Popular Alliance and one representative of the Catalan nationalists.

An initial draft of the constitution stated that “the Constitution

recognises and the monarchy guarantees the right to autonomy of the different nationalities and regions that form part of Spain, the unity of the state and the solidarity amongst its peoples.”

The wording in the final version became, “The Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, common and indissoluble motherland of all the Spanish peoples and it recognises and guarantees the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions that form part of it.”

Although the reference to the monarchy was deleted from this section, the constitution established a secular constitutional monarchy (even though the Spanish people had three times deposed the monarchy in their history) headed by Franco's chosen successor Juan Carlos. Appointed by Franco in 1975 in place of his father Juan de Bourbon, Juan Carlos had all the powers of a dictator when he became king.

The constitution was advanced as being all things to all men. When, after 14 months, it was published Suárez acknowledged that “all political forces [were] cooperating towards the aim of fostering illusions and hope.” Manuel Fraga, Franco's propaganda minister and founder of the Popular Alliance, voted for the constitution, saying it did not “represent resistance to change and revenge.” He wanted to impose “diluted democracy from above ‘without a revision of existing institutions’” (Raymond Carr, *Spain 1808-1975*).

Most crucially in the ruling class's efforts to divert working class opposition, PCE leader Santiago Carrillo claimed the constitution would “make socialist transformations possible.”

Far from ushering in an era of socialist transformations, Spain is now governed by Franco's political heirs in Fraga's successor party, the Popular Party (PP). Fraga groomed the current Prime Minister José María Aznar to lead the PP.

The PSOE member on the constitution committee and former PSOE speaker, Gregorio Peces-Barba, has advanced a crude apologia for allowing the Francoists to reconstitute themselves politically by claiming that the PP is a more respectable and less dangerous alternative:

“The PP swallowed up the extreme right. I do not mean the PP is of the extreme right, but the right-wing militants—except for a few small groups such as the Falangists—are now PP voters. That was a great service which Fraga did for Spanish democracy and which the PP continues to provide.”

After Aznar formed a minority government in 1996 relying on Basque and Catalan nationalists, the PP won an outright majority in 2000. Aznar said he could now rule “without complexes” and implement policies on immigration, education and autonomy that he held back on in 1996-2000.

Religion is back in schools, political dissent stamped on and popular opinion ignored. The government is trying to revive Spain's old imperialist ambitions, forming a Commonwealth with its former Latin American colonies and vying for a place in the G8 group of leading powers. Aznar went to war in Iraq despite the overwhelming opposition of the Spanish people.

Whilst Spain has economic growth of 2.4 percent of GDP—well above an EU average of about 0.5 percent—much of it is due to consumer spending and a speculative property boom.

The working class has suffered as a result of Aznar's aggressive liberalisation and privatisation policies. Unemployment remains at 11 percent and casual part time employment is widespread. Spain has about the lowest social spending in Europe.

Francoist traditions have been revived and Republican memorials spurned. The Franco memorial at El Valle de los Caidos (The Valley of the Fallen) near Madrid still stands—an affront to the 100,000 killed during and after the Civil War and the 30,000 who remain in unmarked graves. For a long time the Aznar government refused a United Nations Human Rights Agency request to help families find the bodies of the disappeared and the Supreme Court continued to designate those assassinated by the Franco regime as “criminals.”

When the PP finally approved a parliamentary motion two years ago that officially recognised the “repression of the Francoist dictatorship” and denounced the “violent imposition of ideologies,” it was more to do with justifying its repression of the Basque separatist ETA. While accepting this motion, the PP made clear it was not prepared to discuss the Franco era any further. The PP's Ignacio Gil Lazaro says a bipartisan pact was agreed with the PSOE not to raise the issue again and the party leadership boycotted one 25th anniversary event—a parliamentary ceremony in memory of the Republican victims of the Civil War.

One of the most explosive issues still haunting Spain is Basque and Catalan nationalism. The Constitution was regarded as the “most liberal in Europe” on the question of regional autonomy. The Basque region has the most autonomy, with the power to raise its own taxes from which it hands over a lump sum to Madrid for national expenditure.

Despite these powers, Basque Premier Juan José Ibarretxe is now calling for “a Basque state freely associated with Spain.” Ibarretxe's position has been strengthened in the last few days by the formation of a new three-party nationalist government in Catalonia that includes representatives of the Catalan Republican Left (ERC), which calls for Catalan independence. Pasqual Maragall of the largest party in the coalition, the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC), has said, “With a tripartite government of the left there will be a renovation of our relationship with Spain based on a declaration of independence and the freedom of decision.”

The coalition government wants to collect its own taxes and pay less “tribute” to the central government. It aims to make the Catalan High Court of Justice the highest court in the region, bypassing the Supreme Court in Madrid. These proposals will be put to a referendum vote.

Both sets of regionalist politicians have illusions that a European Constitution will provide them with a direct route to the European Union and look to enlarged powers for the EU Committee for the Regions. However the Spanish and French governments are blocking any greater powers for this committee and it is inconceivable that other EU powers such as the United Kingdom, Italy or Belgium would accept measures that would loosen the bonds of their own state's component parts beyond limited measures of devolution.

The nationalist problem in Spain has echoes of the former Yugoslavia. Like the politicians in the richer republics of the former Balkan state, politicians in the two Spanish regions base their nationalist demagoguery on demands to stop subsidising the poorer south. Spanish intervention in the Balkans went ahead thanks to the parliamentary support of the Basque and Catalan nationalists, who recognised in the growth of Balkan regional interests a reflection of their own political aspirations.

But the Balkan experience highlights both the dangers represented by their own perspective and its limitations. Even if realised the Basque and Catalan regions would only end up as limited regional fiefdoms under the more or less direct control of one or other imperialist power, as is the case in Bosnia. The sole beneficiary of this process would be the regional bourgeoisie, who would hope to secure a greater share of the monies accruing from the exploitation of the working class.

The response of the PP government has been to treat these questions as criminal, not political matters. Aznar calls Ibarretxe's “free association” plan “the worst aggression against the Spanish constitution since 1978” and says the PP will campaign in the next election on a “war on nationalism.” Aznar has banned the political wing of ETA and is pushing a Penal Code reform through the Senate that will allow political leaders to be imprisoned if they hold referenda deemed to be unconstitutional.

The PSOE has loyally supported Aznar's repression against any expression of Basque nationalism. Gregorio Peces-Barba says, “The [Spanish] constitution is modifiable and some elements of it need to be changed.” However, he continues, “The European constitution not only does not facilitate, but it makes impossible for such secessionist positions like the Ibarretxe plan, even if it is a watered down secession.”

The PSOE will make constitutional reform the main plank of its election platform, but in order to preserve the Spanish state's authority by offering limited reform of the moribund Senate supposedly to give the autonomous governments more voice.

Aznar says he will consider reform of “secondary matters” in the constitution, adding, “What is disputed is what is to be reformed... There are some people who do not like to pronounce the word ‘Spain’ but I like it. Nobody is going to destroy democracy in Spain. No one is going to break the rules of the game, or our constitution which took us so long to achieve.”



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