

Spain: Vatican intensifies campaign against Socialist Party government

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Spain's Catholic Church has organised a series of demonstrations against the Socialist Party (PSOE) government's legalization of homosexual marriage. The largest of these took place on June 18 in Madrid.

On June 30, Spain's congress voted 187 to 147 to pass the legislation. The protests nevertheless demonstrate how the Vatican and the highest echelons of the Church have joined hands with the right-wing Popular Party (PP) in a campaign to destabilize and drive the PSOE from power.

Nineteen bishops joined the protests against the legislation. The presence of Madrid's cardinal in a protest against an incumbent government has not been seen since the 1930s. Cardinal Antonio Rouco Varela described the legislation as the negation of "human reason" and an expression of "anarchic freedom."

The demonstration was officially organized by the Forum for the Family, but was dominated by right-wing Catholic groups such as Communion and Liberation, Opus Dei as well as the PP itself.

Party leader Mariano Rajoy said the PP will examine the law "to decide whether to present an appeal against the law on the grounds of it being unconstitutional."

After the law was passed, the Vatican's Cardinal Lopez repeated a demand for a campaign of civil disobedience to prevent gay marriages taking place. His call and the protests were reported July 1 in the *National Catholic Review* under the headline, "A new battle plan, Spanish Catholics take pope's fight against 'relativism' to the streets."

Spain's bishops' organization, the Episcopal Congress, under the direction of the Vatican and new Pope Joseph Ratzinger, encouraged Catholics to "take to the streets" and to combat what they described as a "virus" the PSOE has released into society. The size of the Madrid demonstration was hotly disputed. Police estimated attendance at 166,000, PP Madrid officials estimated 700,000 and Forum for the Family declared 1,500,000 had protested. Most media sources settled on 500,000.

The demonstration was an outpouring of religious backwardness characterized by an air of nostalgia for the certainties of the era of the Franco dictatorship 1939-75, when Catholicism had all the privileges and power of a state religion. The slogan of the protest was "Madrid, World's Capital of Family." Signs displayed read "Sodomy, not with my money" and "Raul is not my mother." Madrid's cardinal was approached on bended knee by parishioners kissing his pastoral ring. Groups of nuns and priests sang in praise of the Virgin Mary, mixing with the PP and a myriad of small

fascist groups.

Spokesman for the Forum for the Family Benigno Blanco, a member of Opus Dei and a former PP official, denounced the legislation as an "attempt to destroy the institution of the family." He threatened, "This is not the end; this is the beginning of a new unprecedented social movement: the family movement."

Over 60 international Catholic organizations attended the rally. Sharon Slater, president of the Arizona-based ecumenical organization United Families International, declared, "This is a powerful moment that marks the beginning of a world movement."

The protests were launched after a series of polls revealed that the Catholic Church has become one of the most distrusted institutions in Spain. The poll also revealed that only 14 percent of young Spaniards attend church—a decline of 50 percent in the last five years. The Church denounced the polls as government propaganda.

The Vatican is using the protests in part in order to portray itself as a persecuted minority under siege by rampant secularism. The bishop of Malaga declared that although Catholics are no longer subject to torture, there is the "psychological torture which is no less painful." The Church has "never had to face anything so serious as this in its 2000-year history," he claimed.

Some Church figures have compared the mood to that preceding the rise of the Franco dictatorship. According to the *National Catholic Review*, Martin Patino, the former vicar general for Madrid's former Cardinal Vincente Enrique y Tarancon who now runs the Fundacion Encuentro, explained that the situation is "as grave as 1931, when Cardinal Pedro Segura y Saenz published a blunt pastoral letter rejecting Spain's new republic and supporting the King, which helped lay the groundwork for the war [the return of a right-wing coalition in 1933 and the civil war 1936-39]."

The Episcopal Congress is putting into practice the strategy of the new Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, which echoes that of the Christian fundamentalists in the United States in ensuring the rise to power of the Bush administration. Manuel Bru, spokesman for Cardinal Varela, described this strategy as "El Cid-meets-Ralph-Reed"—a reference to the symbol of Christian Spain's struggle against Islam and a leader of America's religious right.

Bru argues that the American experience can and must be applied in Europe. The Catholic Church in Spain is no novice itself in the art of bringing down governments and blessing military dictatorships.

On his deathbed, the late Pope John Paul II initiated the campaign against the PSOE's legislation. His first act after the election of the PSOE on March 14, 2004 was to summon the new ambassador to demand the Spanish government abandon its social program. Speaking to Spanish clergy visiting the Vatican last February, he demanded a struggle to reverse the "weakening" of the "imprint of Catholic faith in Spanish culture and restrict religious liberty."

The previous pope's demands caused turmoil in the Episcopal Congress. Sections of the Church feared that such a public intervention into political life had inherent dangers. Barcelona's auxiliary bishop, Joan Carrera, declared on June 17, "What is worrying is that two poles are forming, and the Catholic Church is included in one of them. This situation means that half of Spain will not look at Christianity with spiritual peace or intellectual curiosity, because it will be divided along political lines."

Martin Patino would also add, "In my opinion, and that of many theologians, the bishops have made a serious mistake. Paul VI said that the moment a bishop identifies with a particular ideology, he is dissolving the unity of his flock."

The dominant voices within the Church had no such qualms and are intent on restoring the PP to power and so increasing their influence over the political, cultural and social life of Spain in a way not seen since the Franco dictatorship. The PSOE has frozen education reforms drawn up between the former PP government and the bishops. The *National Catholic Reporter* cited mutterings in the Spanish Church of so-called "dark forces" behind the PSOE government and allusions to Prime Minister Jose Zapatero's Republican father's "Masonic" leanings.

Pope Benedict XVI's public intervention in political life is not restricted to Spain and is already well under way in Italy. Recently the Vatican declared victory when Italy's bishops joined with right-wing politicians to help defeat a referendum on the loosening of Italy's fertility research laws, which Silvio Berlusconi had made the most stringent in Europe. The Vatican led a boycott campaign, particularly in rural areas. When voting commenced on June 12-13 the required 50 percent turnout for the referendum to have legal status was not met.

Despite the Forum for the Family's attempt to portray itself as "not with any party," a large number of senior Popular Party figures were welcomed on its protest. These included PP General Secretary Angel Acebes and parliamentary spokesman Eduardo Zaplana.

Throughout the PSOE's first year in office the PP has waged a campaign to de-legitimize the elections that took place in the immediate aftermath of the Madrid bombings on March 11 last year. They have all but openly accused the PSOE of working in tandem with terrorist bombers in order to seize power. The PP describes the spontaneous demonstrations that broke out the day before the elections, when it became known that the PP lied as to the authors of the bombings, as a "black day" in the history of Spanish democracy. They have sought to paralyze the PSOE's ability to pass legislation and govern.

The PP does not oppose "gay unions," but has opposed the concept of "gay marriage." The party is nervous about the Church's use of apocalyptic religious denunciations due to the

popularity of the PSOE's proposals. Its leaders are concerned that this will backfire and show that it is the PP that poses the greatest threat to democratic rights rather than the PSOE.

However, the PP's attempt to distance itself from the Church's more homophobic comments received a blow in the Upper House debates on the legislation. In the course of senate hearings on the bill to legalize gay marriage, the PP called as a witness Aquilano Polaino, a psychologist at the San Pablo CEU Catholic University. In comments reminiscent of those used to justify the repression of gays under the Franco dictatorship, Polaino described homosexuality as a form of pathology to be cured by the use of therapy. PP deputy Augustin Conde applauded his testimony as "magnificent."

The alliance between these discredited forces could not withstand a sustained political offensive by the working class. But the PSOE's policy has been to block any such political counterattack, while doing all they can to defend the legitimacy of the PP and the Church. It has been left to gay rights groups and others to draw the obvious historical parallels.

Spain's gay community organized a counter-protest and warned that behind the campaign of the Church and the PP is an attempt to restore "Franco's Catholic dictatorship." Beatriz Gimeno, president of the Spanish Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals and Bisexuals, said, "It's an image taken straight out of 30 years ago. It represents very few citizens and is a return to a national-Catholicism of Spain's extreme right."

Homosexuals under the Franco dictatorship were treated with the utmost brutality. If they were not murdered, they were imprisoned and tortured in order to cure them of their "disease" and return them to "normality."

Apart from a few minor criticisms, the only official response from the PSOE to the protests came from Deputy Prime Minister Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega. She declared that the government "had no desire for a confrontation with the Church."

Zapatero reiterated the PSOE's commitment to the 1979 accord signed between the Church and Adolfo Suarez's Union de Centro Democratico, the first elected government after the fall of Franco. According to *Newsweek International*, this accord "provided for vast direct and indirect subsidies to pay priests and religion teachers, as well as for the upkeep of churches and church-run institutions in Spain. The Spanish government doles out an estimated 3.5 billion [euros] annually to such causes."

During discussions on the drafting of a new parliamentary constitution in 1978, the PSOE helped ensure that it did not encroach on the position of the Church and thus repeat what it described as the "mistake" of the first parliamentary constitution in Spain it co-authored as part of the 1931 Republican-PSOE coalition government. This constitution called for the formal separation of Church and state.



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