

Spain: General calls for military intervention over Catalonia

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On January 7, Lieutenant-General Jose Mena Aguado, the commander of Spain's 50,000 ground troops, threatened military intervention should the Socialist Party (PSOE) government pass a statute giving the Catalan autonomous government status as a "nation," together with control over the region's taxes and the judicial system. Mena denounced the Catalan Statute as a threat to Spain's territorial integrity.

His words could only be interpreted as a threat of military invasion of Catalonia or a coup against the PSOE government.

The Catalan Statute has no progressive democratic content. It is an attempt by the Catalan bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie to secure more direct control of the richest region of Spain and is accompanied by constant propaganda asking why Catalonia should pay taxes that subsidise poorer regions. Nevertheless, Mena's threats represent a grave danger to the democratic rights of workers in Catalonia and throughout Spain.

The speech follows a rightist campaign stretching back almost two years to oust the PSOE from power. The Popular Party (PP), the Catholic Church and the military top brass rejected the result of the March 2004 general election, when a mass movement brought down the Popular Party government of former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar. The PSOE was the undeserving beneficiary of popular opposition to Aznar's support for the Iraq war and his attempts to conceal the fact that the March 11 terror bombings in Madrid were carried out by Islamic fundamentalists by blaming the Basque separatist group, ETA. Aznar described the election result as an act of "antidemocratic coercion."

General Mena delivered his speech during the military's Christmas holiday celebrations. He threatened, "The armed forces have a mission to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain.... The constitution establishes a series of impassable limits for any statute of autonomy. But if those limits are crossed, which fortunately seems unthinkable at present, it would be necessary to apply Article 8 of the constitution—the armed forces, including the army, the navy and the air force, have the duty to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain, and to defend its integrity and constitutional order.... It is our obligation to warn that there could be serious consequences for the armed forces as an institution and for its members if the Catalan statute is approved in its proposed form."

Article 8 was the very provision cited by the authors of the abortive military coup of February 23, 1981.

Mena's speech was denounced as a breach of Article 7 of the Armed Forces disciplinary law that states that military personnel are "duty bound to be neutral to political points of view." In response, he insisted that he spoke for a sizeable constituency in the army: "I am obliged to know the feelings, concerns and worries of my subordinates and pass them on to the highest military authorities and make them public at their behest.... In my visits to different units in recent months, I have noticed that the two major concerns of commanders are terrorism and the future unity of Spain.... The concern about the unity of Spain has been brought about by the Catalan Statute."

He continued: "I have always insisted soldiers must not get involved in

political reflections [but] it is our duty to warn of the serious consequences that the approval of the Catalan statute in the terms in which it is drafted could bring, both for the armed forces as an institution and for the people who make up the armed forces."

The general then demanded support for his position from other officers: "Let's not forget that we have sworn and promised to follow the constitution and ensure that it is followed.... For soldiers, any oath or promise is a question of honour."

At the same time that Mena gave his speech, PSOE Defence Minister José Bono was speaking alongside King Juan Carlos, declaring that in the post-Franco transition from fascism to parliamentary rule the "times of the military rattling its swords have ended."

As soon as he knew of General Mena's statement, Bono sought to lull the population to sleep by claiming that the speech was "an act of isolated indiscipline that's already been corrected."

However, the speech only echoed an incident reported by Spanish daily *El Pais* last summer involving Colonel José Maria Manrique. On June 26, 2005, Manrique, the army's former liaison with the Civil Guard, sent an email to thousands of his military colleagues urging soldiers "to serve Spain until death" by defending its unity against the threat of Basque and Catalan separatism."

It continued, "God, do not allow us to witness the dismemberment of Spain without being able to do anything about it. God save Spain."

Manrique's email was almost word for word the same as Mena's speech, confirming the general's claim to speak for others in the army. Manrique declared the necessity to defend "the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation" and that "the armed forces are duty bound to protect Spain's territorial integrity and its constitutional order."

According to *El Pais*, he invoked an old military oath of allegiance, "I pledge to spill, in defence of the honour and independence of the fatherland, the last drop of my blood." He continued, "In light of recent events I feel that we are being called on to fulfill the pledge we took. This life will have served for nothing ... if we are not true to that and to the meaning of what we swore to defend: the unity and integrity of the fatherland."

After an investigation, Colonel Manrique was placed under house arrest for eight days for what was described as "minor disciplinary offences"—that is, "Making demands or requests by means that are disrespectful to official channels."

It looks as though General Mena will receive roughly the same kid gloves treatment, being relieved of duty until he retires in March.

A government survey—hastily conducted—on the impact of Mena's speech concluded that his views were not representative of Spain's armed forces. However, sections of the military, political and media establishment have voiced outspoken support for Mena's threats.

The *Times* in Britain reported on January 9: "It became clear yesterday that Lieutenant-General Mena enjoyed some support within the armed forces. Retired Colonel José Conde Monge, president of the Spanish

Military Association, applauded his remarks and criticised his arrest. Monge declared, ‘We are in a dangerous situation that the politicians do not want to acknowledge but which threatens to break up Spain.’”

On January 10, *La Razón*, a right-wing newspaper, published a letter signed by 50 retired officers supporting Mena’s speech as a “faithful reflection of the opinion, concern and feelings of many commanders and officers.”

On January 9, *Spain Herald* declared, “Lieutenant General Mena made a statement befitting a high commander these days. He reminded everyone the constitution has limits and bestows on the armed forces a clear and definitive mandate, written by General Gutierrez Mellado, on defending the integrity of Spanish territory and the constitutional order.... Our minister’s [Jose Bono] reaction is also significant. Right now the Socialist Party’s concern is not that the armed forces will attack the constitutional order but how to get them to passively stand aside as they dismantle it—to get the armed forces to ignore their sworn duty.”

This support demonstrates that a military solution to the constitutional crisis gripping Spain is winning growing support amongst rightist forces.

PP leader Mariano Rajoy stated that General Mena’s speech reflected “the concern, uncertainty, divisions and tensions” caused by the PSOE’s favourable reception to the Catalan Statute.... Things like this don’t happen without reason,” the *International Herald Tribune* reported.

Rajoy not only justifies Mena’s remarks, but by implication the intentions, if not the methods, of the participants of the failed coup of 1981. He asked, “What has occurred to cause someone to make a declaration of a kind unheard in Spain for more than 20 years?”

Only four days previously, on January 3, the PP had organised a mass protest in the Castilian town of Salamanca to resist a government decision that 3 percent of the archives stolen from Catalonia by the fascists during the Civil War period, 1936-39, be returned to the Catalan government. The dominant political position on the demonstration was that the dispersal of a part of the archive, even though authenticated copies would remain, threatened the unity of Spain, its national identity and its collective national self-consciousness.

Bono held a private meeting with Mena, after which he insisted that the general had assured him that he had written the speech himself, and “that nobody had induced him to say what he said.”

The PSOE has refused to examine the possible connections between Colonel Martinez and General Mena’s activities, or to launch an investigation of the former military officers, newspapers and political leaders who have supported the pronouncement of Mena. Despite putting Mena under house arrest, Bono went out of his way to pay homage to the military and attack its critics. “No institution has adapted itself so completely to democracy as the armed forces,” he said in a radio interview.

This stand is echoed by the nationalist parties. Josep Duran, a spokesman for the Catalan Nationalist Coalition CiU (former partner of the PP government), said, “The government has made an intelligent decision.” The Catalan Republican Left (ERC) (in a coalition government with the Catalan section of the PSOE headed by Pasqual Maragall) merely called for Mena to be sacked and to ensure that his speech did not affect the discussions on the Catalan Statute.

For its part, the Basque National Party (PNV), another former coalition partner of the PP, compared Mena’s speech with the statements of officers involved in the failed coup in 1981, but only to dismiss the threat of a similar coup. PNV President Josu Jon Imaz said, “Twenty-five years ago declarations like this would have put everyone on edge because of the fear of a coup.... Today, in a consolidated democracy integrated into the European Union ... they just seem ridiculous.”

The British *Financial Times* was equally dismissive of Mena’s speech, describing it as “anachronistic” and stating that the “days of the military pronunciamiento are over. Spain is a confident and prosperous

democracy.”

But the newspaper then noted an important detail: “Yet in a speech last Friday General Mena referred to the Catalan regional government’s plans to expand its powers as a repetition of pre-civil war history (he referred to the May 1932 debates on the Catalan autonomy statute).”

It is significant that Mena has examined the experience of the 1931-33 Republican-Socialist Party coalition government and concluded that the military can prevent the fracturing of Spain by intervening militarily. It reveals that his remarks stemmed from carefully worked-out political conceptions.

For its part, the PSOE is unable to publicly discuss the political lessons of this period because it was the policies of this party that defeated the revolutionary socialist aspirations of the masses and paved the way to Franco’s victory.

The Republican-PSOE coalition was elected in April 1931 on a wave of mass political radicalization that forced the right wing to concede elections. It promised a democratic constitution and to introduce a social welfare policy to relieve the suffering of the industrial working class and the agricultural workers.

However, in the face of resistance from the right, it abandoned any democratic pretensions. The government rejected the redistribution of the land to the peasantry and the separation the Church from the state. It refused to free Spain’s remaining colonies in Morocco. Most significantly, it did not break up the reactionary caste of officers that had been the main counterrevolutionary force throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It feared the working class and its revolutionary demands far more than the forces of the right wing.

The coalition government, after being elected on the basis of a militant mass movement, carried out the program of the right, paving the way for its return to power in 1934. Before the July 1936 military-fascist uprising of General Franco, the Popular Front government censored workers’ newspapers to suppress warnings that Franco was preparing a coup.

Like its predecessors, the current leadership of the PSOE came to power in 2004 as a result of a mass movement and has since retreated and compromised in the face of every counteroffensive by the right. This has only emboldened the PP, the Catholic Church and the military to the point where there is now open talk of armed intervention. Mena’s speech demonstrates that a substantial section of the political and military establishment has concluded that it can no longer secure its interests within the framework of the parliamentary system established in 1978 and is actively considering the possibility of dictatorial rule.



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