

Spain: 1981 coup leader accuses Socialist Party government of national betrayal

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In late January, former Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero Molina published a letter denouncing the Socialist Party (PSOE) government for betraying Spain.

Twenty-five years ago this month, on February 23, 1981, the fascist Tejero led an aborted military coup to overturn the transition to a constitutional monarchy as a prelude to the destruction of the workers' organizations he blamed for the economic and political turmoil in Spain at that time.

His political reemergence must be understood as the latest manifestation of a right-wing campaign involving the Popular Party, the Church and sections of the armed forces to destabilize the PSOE government that came to power as a result of widespread popular opposition to the disgraced government of Jose Maria Aznar.

Tejero has openly joined with the Popular Party's (PP) defence of senior military officers' public threats to deploy the armed forces should the PSOE agree a statute giving the Catalan autonomous government status as a "nation," together with control over the region's taxes and the judicial system.

The Catalan statute is advanced by its supporters as an issue of self-determination. Fundamentally, it represents an attempt by the Catalan bourgeois parties to expand their power so as to secure direct control over the richest region of Spain. The Catalan nationalists insist that Catalonia's taxes should remain in Catalonia and not be used to subsidize Spain's poorer regions.

Such demands have been seized on by the PP and sections of the military to demand action against the government in order to protect the territorial integrity of Spain.

Tejero denounced the PSOE in the newspaper *Melilla Hoy*, which has a long connection with right-wing military organisations. This letter declared support for the PP's campaign for a national referendum on the Catalan statute, behind which extra-parliamentary rightist forces are being mobilized.

This was confirmed in a report on the *European Tribune* web site January 28, in which Santiago Abascal, chairman of the *Nuevas Generaciones* (New Generations) of the PP in the Basque Country, explained the purpose for the recent creation of the Foundation for the Defence of the Spanish Nation. He declared that in order to resist the Catalan statute, "it will be necessary to fill the streets of Spain with resisting compatriots and that they do not resign themselves.... There's no turning back. Tomorrow will be [too] late."

Tajero's letter declared, "In view of the news of secret meetings between [Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez] Zapatero and his co-thinkers as well as the consequences therein, there is only one answer: Who do these people think they are to be playing with the integrity of Spain? Who are they to be giving away our money in fistfuls to

Catalan parties whose only desire is to blow Spain up to the four winds? Do they perhaps think us more stupid than we are?"

He continued bitterly, "Perhaps to make us yet more like sheep than they already have? Is it that they don't plan to stop throwing wasps upon us until our noses swell, and throw us to the middle of the street? What cowards would we be should we allow this to become a vile reality? Why not ask in a referendum if this is what the Spanish people want? I pray to God, in whom I still publicly believe, to impress upon the King the wisdom to see this clearly, and to confuse those who would give away the country for 30 votes, or something more shameful."

Tejero's appeal to the King to intervene echoes that he made at the time of the 1981 coup, which he describes as a "rebellion." In fact, Tejero led a well-planned military operation aimed at liquidating the political organizations of the working class. After the coup was aborted and its ring leaders were arrested, lists of workers' leaders were uncovered.

Prior to the coup, while posted to the Basque region, Tejero gained a macabre reputation for embracing the bloody corpses of Civil Guard officers that had been killed by the separatist group ETA. He was involved in a number of abortive coup attempts prior to 1981, the most significant being Operacion Galaxia on November 17, 1978, which was set in motion only weeks after the new parliamentary constitution was agreed. It was timed to coincide with the rally to commemorate the death of Franco when Madrid would have been overrun by fascists. It was discovered and after his arrest Tejero was jailed for seven months. However, he was allowed to return to a military post in Madrid surrounded by Falangists—where he became involved in further plots.

On February 23, 1981, during a televised session of congress, Tejero marched into the chamber flanked by armed Civil Guards and fired shots into the air. He ordered the arrest of leaders of the PSOE, the Communist Party (PCE) and liberal opposition figures who were held hostage and expected to be shot. The military planned to impose drastic attacks on the working class through a military dictatorship, as they had done under Franco.

In his *The Triumph of Democracy in Spain*, historian Paul Preston provides a powerful account of the events surrounding the coup and the role of Tejero.

He explained that at "6.20 p.m. a group of civil guards under Colonel Tejero arrived at the Cortes in private buses specially bought by Tejero's wife..."

Tejero took the 350 deputies hostage. His troops then led away at gunpoint the leader of the Socialist Opposition, Felipe Gonzalez; the leader of the Communist Party, Santiago Carrillo; a vice-premier in

the outgoing government, Lieutenant-General Gutierrez Mellado; the outgoing defence minister, Agustin Rodriguez Sahagun; and Alfonso Guerra, the deputy leader of the Socialist Party.

“Tejero telephoned the headquarters of the Captain-General of the Valencia Military Region, Jaime Milans del Bosch. His message was brief and incriminating: ‘*Pavia* here. Everything in order. Objective achieved. All quiet.’ The code-name *Pavia* referred to the nineteenth-century general who put an end to the First Republic when he threatened the Cortes with artillery. Tejero then returned to the chamber and announced that a senior military personage would shortly arrive to take control.

“A few minutes after Tejero’s arrival in the Cortes, Milans del Bosch declared a state of emergency in the Valencian region. Every fifteen minutes, the local radio broadcast a proclamation or *bando* by Milans which began with the preamble ‘in the light of events in the capital and the consequent vacuum of power, it is my duty to guarantee order in the military region under my command until I receive instructions from His Majesty the King’.

“The *bando* ordered the militarization of all public service personnel, imposed a nine o’clock curfew and banned all political activities. Tanks took up positions alongside important public buildings. In the offices of trade unions and political parties, frantic efforts were made to destroy membership files and documents which might have facilitated a purge by the ultra-right. From the Basque Country, cars flooded across the border into France.

“Mysterious troop movements took place in different parts of Spain and in Madrid, where the streets were deserted, the radio and television broadcasting studios at Prado del Rey were taken over by a unit from the Division Acorazada de Brunete at 7.48 p.m. They insisted that the radio broadcast only military marches. At 9.20 p.m. they received orders to withdraw and did so.”

The coup was aborted when wider support in the military and political establishment did not materialize. Neither the King nor the representatives of the former fascist state were averse to military coups, but when the miners of Asturias, who had a powerful revolutionary tradition, denounced the coup and initiated a general strike and prepared to confront the fascist officers they feared a revolutionary confrontation with the working class that could threaten the foundations of capitalist rule.

As workers prepared to resist Tejero, the PSOE and the PCE leadership diverted this powerful movement into support for their backroom deals with King Juan Carlos and former fascist officers “loyal” to the new constitution.

The King, groomed by Franco since he was a boy, was once again promoted by the PSOE and PCE as the true independent representative of the people and the saviour of Spanish democracy. As he had done during the transition from General Franco’s dictatorship, the fascist politicians, military personnel and civil servants remained untouched.

Tejero and a number of other figures were arrested and imprisoned, sacrificed in order to prevent any further investigation into the extent of the plot and the involvement of others in the upper echelons of the state. While awaiting trial Tejero issued statements defending his actions and no restrictions were placed on visits from his political supporters. Many of the minor figures who participated in the coup were released without charge. Tejero became a hero amongst right-wing officers and remains an influential figure.

In 1982, under the leadership of Felipe Gonzales, the PSOE came to power with a huge majority. However, after 14 years in office not one

former fascist official was prosecuted for crimes under the dictatorship. Instead the Gonzales government invoked the attempted military coup of 1981 to argue that such moves would only revive “the brutal passions of the civil war.” Left intact the reactionary caste of military officers that is once again threatening the democratic rights of the working class.

Tejero’s statement is the latest in a series of pronouncements by serving and retired senior officers. On June 26, 2005, Colonel José Maria 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.

On January 7 this year, Lieutenant-General Jose Mena Aguado, the commander of Spain’s 50,000 ground troops, threatened military intervention should the Socialist Party government pass the Catalan statute. Lieutenant-General Mena was put under house arrest, but no other action was taken.

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.”

Mena’s statement was followed by a letter in *Melilla Hoy* by Captain Roberto Gonzalez of the notorious Legionnaires based in Spain’s African colonial outpost. In a venomous attack Gonzalez complained of how “Spain is being dismembered, how the national flag is burned in public, how terrorists are allowed to hold demonstrations and social events, and how a generation of Spaniards no longer recognize Spain as their fatherland.”

Although public attacks on the government are forbidden by military law, Gonzalez declared that the only hesitation he felt was whether or not to take his troops to Madrid and deliver the letter of protest in person to Prime Minister Zapatero.

These statements are designed to foment a right-wing movement amongst the troops, just as the PP and the Catholic Church are doing by protesting over the PSOE’s policies on same sex relationships and religious education.

In a revealing interview in the Chilean newspaper *Mercurio* discussing the emergence of populist leaders in South America such as Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez, Popular Party leader Aznar gave an indication of the PP’s strategy in Spain. “I hope that the populist wave is stopped,” he said. “Somebody has to do it, somebody has to say that this is not the way. I’m prepared to do it and I know that I have a lot of friends in the area ready to help. So we’re going to see if we can get organised and do it.”

Tejero’s letter to *Melilla Hoy* was timed to appear just before an official state visit to Melilla, one of Spain’s last remaining colonial outposts in Africa, by Zapatero. It was the first official visit by an incumbent prime minister since Adolfo Suarez in 1980. Moroccans anticipated that Zapatero would make a statement on new negotiations on the status of the colonies. However, in an effort to assuage right-wing military officers he declared that the Spanish claim to Ceuta and Melilla “is not and will not be up for discussion.”



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