

Royal visit revives tensions between Spain and Morocco

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A royal visit by King Juan Carlos and his wife Queen Sofia to the disputed Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the coast of Morocco elicited a sharp rebuke from the Moroccan government. The enclaves are the oldest remnants of Spanish colonial territory in North Africa, and remained under Spanish control when Morocco gained its independence.

At the request of Morocco's King Mohammed VI, his country's ambassador to Spain was recalled for an indefinite period in response to the visit. A spokesman said the government expressed its "strong rejection and total disapproval of this regrettable initiative." King Mohammed also denounced the visit personally, saying, "it undermines the feelings of Moroccans."

The last Spanish royal to visit the enclaves was Alfonso XIII, in 1927. Juan Carlos had visited the Moroccan capital Rabat early last year. Relations between the two countries have been improving in recent years, although a visit to Ceuta and Melilla by Socialist Party Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero last year also attracted criticism.

Zapatero's government consulted with Rabat about a royal visit to the enclaves. The trip was apparently the idea of the king himself, who described it as his "duty." The Moroccan government did not refuse permission, but its subsequent hostile response has alarmed the Spanish government.

Insisting that Spain wanted the "best possible relations" with Rabat, Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos said that ties between the countries are "solid." Deputy Prime Minister Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega called relations with Morocco "extraordinarily good," saying they were based on "sincere affection and mutual respect." Madrid insists that normal relations will return shortly.

The Moroccan government was protesting not just the

visit itself, but its timing. It coincided with the "Green March" celebration, a national holiday marking the Spanish withdrawal from the southern territory in 1975. Juan Carlos's description of the enclaves as "an integral part of our national territory" was highly provocative. Moroccan Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi warned that "Spain must understand that its colonial era is over and for good."

The visit provoked demonstrations outside the Spanish embassy in Rabat and on the border with Melilla. More than a thousand demonstrators protested at the Moroccan border with Ceuta.

The administrations of the regions organised demonstrations welcoming the royal visit. The president of Ceuta, Juan Jesus Vivas, said that Moroccan reactions would not alter "the sense of satisfaction" at the visit. Melilla's president, Juan José Imbroda, was even more bullish, calling the visit "a totally Spanish act, within the Spanish nation, with the sovereignty of Spain, and which only affects Spaniards."

This line, asserted by Juan Carlos, was echoed in the right-wing Spanish press. An editorial in *El Mundo* said that the visit would "reaffirm Spanish sovereignty over the two autonomous territories." They have had the status of autonomous regions in the Spanish government since 1995.

Ceuta and Melilla are two of the last remaining outposts of the old Spanish empire. They remain strategically and militarily important to Spanish interests because of the significant trade that passes through from North Africa to Europe and the world's shipping lanes, situated on the Straits of Gibraltar. Most of the industry in the towns is fishing and shipyards.

The enclaves are also one of the main routes through which African immigrants attempt to enter the

European Union. Frontex, the EU security agency assigned to control immigration, has a large contribution of resources from the Spanish Civil Guard, mostly in the form of patrol boats.

Security in the area has been greatly tightened in the last few years to control the rising number of economic migrants and refugees. Many hundreds have been turned away or held in detention camps before being deported. Last year, dozens were killed and injured on the fences by security guards, and some have died of thirst in the desert.

Morocco is heavily dependent on Spain for its export market, and Spain has invested extensively in Morocco. Despite this, there have been repeated diplomatic crises, especially over access to fishing and territorial claims over the islands in the region.

There is ongoing prospecting for new oil deposits around the islands. In 2002, frictions reached a boiling point when Morocco landed troops on a rocky and seemingly insignificant outcrop and planted its flag. Spain reacted by arresting some Moroccan soldiers with a military detachment and releasing them only when Morocco agreed to leave the islet, which is used by herdsmen to graze their goats.

The royal visit is an indication that Spain is not prepared to relinquish control of these strategically important regions, despite Morocco's best efforts to secure concessions from its former imperial overlords. Living standards in Morocco compare unfavourably to neighbouring Algeria and Tunisia.

The main challenge to Spain's interests in Morocco does not come from the usually pliant regime in Rabat, but from Paris. France is now Morocco's biggest trading partner. French President Nikolas Sarkozy visited the country earlier this year to strengthen trading ties between the countries. He brokered deals on a wide range of heavy industrial projects, including a new train line between Casablanca and Tangier to be built by the French Alstom.

This may have been behind Morocco's newfound boldness in reasserting its claim to the territories, but it has also encouraged the Spanish ruling class to make a show of strength in order to reassert its control ahead of next March's general election. The Socialist Party (PSOE) government's part in these events is a clear effort to appease the right wing in Spain.



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