

Tens of thousands protest throughout Spain, defying government ban

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Tens of thousands of protesters continue to occupy Madrid's Puerta del Sol and have gathered in the main squares of another 162 towns and cities across Spain in protest over unemployment, government austerity measures and a political system that serves only the banks and big business.

Calling for "Real Democracy Now", the protests are also known as the M-15 movement, the day they were first called by social network and internet groups, drawing a massive response from younger workers, students, the unemployed and broad sectors of Spanish working people.

The protests continued into their sixth day Friday in defiance of the Madrid Electoral Board, which banned demonstrations in the capital ahead of Sunday's municipal and regional elections.

On Thursday night, Spain's central election commission passed a resolution prohibiting rallies throughout the country for Saturday, which is designated as a pre-election "day of reflection", and for Sunday, when the vote takes place for municipal and regional governments.

The resolution was passed by five votes in favour, four against and one abstention. It explicitly prohibits any demonstrations for Saturday, declaring that "our legislation prohibits any act of propaganda or electoral campaigning on the day of reflection." As for Election Day itself, the board ruled that the law bans "forming groups susceptible to obstructing, in any way, access to the polls, as well as the presence in the vicinity of the polls of those likely to interfere with or coerce the free exercise of the right to vote."

Other local electoral committees have followed suit, banning demonstrations and camps set up in Seville and Granada.

Demonstrators in Puerta del Sol, where a small tent city has been erected surrounded by tens of thousands of

protesters, greeted the news of the new ban with jeers and whistles, chanting "*No nos moverán*", or "We shall not be moved."

The legality of the ban on demonstrations is far from clear. The highest court in Spain, the Constitutional Court, endorses the right to hold demonstrations on the day of reflection, provided that the influence on the electorate is "remote". The resolution was taken after the High Court of Justice of Andalucía banned a demonstration celebrating International Women's Day, one day before the elections in 2010. It also declared that the "mere possibility" of infringing on the right to vote was not enough to suppress the right to meet and protest.

Those participating in the largely spontaneous May 15 Movement have made it clear from the outset that they are hostile to all of Spain's major political parties and that they are not making "propaganda" or "obstructing the right to vote", as the electoral boards claim.

Spanish law also demands that any protest be announced with ten days notice so that they may be officially authorized,••• but the protesters insist they have not called any demonstration, but are merely exercising their right of assembly guaranteed under Article 21 of the Spanish Constitution.

There is considerable nervousness within ruling circles that a too-heavy hand will only serve to inflame opposition to the government and the austerity measures it is imposing. The narrow vote of the Madrid Electoral Board itself reflects divisions within the ruling elite over how to react to the demonstrations. The five votes in favour came from the professors of Law elected by the right wing Partido Popular (Popular Party—PP), which currently controls the Madrid regional government, while those opposed and the abstention came from those elected by the ruling Spanish Socialist Workers Party PSOE.

The President of the Electoral Board had declared on Wednesday that the demonstrations were illegal, but his

decision was not binding. Five hundred riot police were deployed on the side streets of the main square of Madrid, but limited themselves to demanding identity cards of all those going into the square and warning them that it was illegal. Minister of Internal Affairs Pérez Rubalcaba of the ruling Socialist Workers Party declared, “The police are here to resolve problems, not to create them”.

President José Zapatero declared, “The Minister of Justice is studying the resolution by the Electoral Board. We are going to see its effects and see what happens this Saturday. The government and the Minister of Internal Affairs are going to act well, with intelligence. This is what we want, to guarantee the rights and to respect the day of reflection.”

Fearful that a violent dispersal of the peaceful protest would have a backlash and make the movement stronger, like the demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Egypt, Rubalcaba and Zapatero have not yet publicly ordered the police to intervene.

Despite this, there are reports of police acting brutally towards protesters.

Miguel, an unemployed architect from Barcelona, told Britain’s *Channel 4 News* that plain-clothes policemen were attacking those camped out in the city’s Plaza de Catalunya.

“They are wearing normal clothes, often dressed like many of the protesters, with protest slogans on their t-shirts, and break the tents up, waking people up and dragging them out of the square.

“Some of the people have said they were hit with batons when they refused to move.”

Real Democracy Now, the protest organisers, have said that in Madrid, State Security Forces acted “excessively.”

In a statement, the group said, “We condemn the brutal police repression and show our solidarity with those injured and the unreasonably detained for acts of peaceful resistance without any provocation, for which we demand the immediate release without charge.”

In an attempt to appease the protestors Zapatero gave an interview in which he insisted that the austerity measures implemented by his government were necessary to prevent a Greek-style bailout that would entail even more savage cutbacks. He likewise defended the bailout of the banks. “We have funded the banks, but we are charging them interests and fees. We have earned 3,300 million euros from the banks. The citizens’ money, public money, has not gone to the banks.”

In reality, Zapatero has imposed one of the most brutal austerity programmes in all of Europe, introducing a 15

billion euro package of spending cuts, including a 5 to 15 percent cuts on civil servants’ salaries, raised the retirement age from 65 to 67, and introducing a new labour law reform that eliminates whatever remained of workers’ protection. The cuts in healthcare and education by the regional governments come on top of this. In some cases such as Catalonia, the cuts represent 10 percent of last years’ budget.

Meanwhile, the official unemployment rate is over 20 percent, while for workers under the age of 25, it is 45 percent.

The PSOE has tried to gain influence over the latest demonstrations, without success. Tomás Gomez, a candidate of the PSOE in Madrid’s regional government elections, contacted one of the organizers to find out how he would be received in the main square. When organizers presented the proposed visit over a microphone, demonstrators booed it down.

The Popular Party, supported by the right wing-media, is calling for the immediate dispersal of all the “illegal” demonstrations. PP General Secretary Maria Dolores de Cospedal insisted, “The Spanish people have the right to ensure that the reflection day is guaranteed”.

The president of the regional government in Madrid, Esperanza Aguirre, went further, claiming that the PSOE is behind the demonstrations. She insinuated that there was a parallel with the spontaneous movement that erupted against the PP government after the bombings in Madrid in March 2004. “Both were against the right wing,” she said.

Thousands more poured into the square after the resolution was passed, with demonstrators chanting, “The voice of the people is not illegal”, “We will not pay for this crisis”, “This will not finish with the elections” and “Where is the left? Essentially on the right.”

There have been solidarity rallies held throughout Europe and around the world in support of the Spanish protesters, with some of the largest taking place in Paris, France, Rome and other Italian cities and in the Plaza del Mayo of Buenos Aires, Argentina.



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