

Demand grows for Spanish prime minister to resign

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Spain's Popular Party (PP) Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy faces growing public anger over his alleged involvement in the Bárcenas corruption scandal.

Under these conditions calls for his resignation by the opposition Socialist Party (PSOE) have been joined by ones from Rajoy's own party, from members concerned that the scandal is detracting from the imposition of austerity measures demanded by the European Union.

So far Rajoy has refused to answer the allegations, declaring last week, "I will defend political stability and I will fulfill the mandate given to me by Spanish voters."

Thousands took part in demonstrations over the weekend saying he should resign.

Calls for Rajoy's resignation have grown after fresh evidence emerged last week showing that, despite previous denials, he remained in close contact with Luis Bárcenas, the PP former treasurer, currently on remand in jail charged with tax fraud, bribery and other crimes.

From 1990, Bárcenas worked in the PP's accounts department, rising to the post of treasurer in 2008. During these years he amassed a fortune worth tens of millions of euros hidden in foreign bank accounts, which were used to channel illegal payments between leading businessmen and PP politicians in return for government contracts.

Secret hand-written ledgers covering the period 1990 to 2008 detail more than 30 donations to the party that were illegal, either because they exceeded the legal limit of €60,000 or because they were made by companies or businessmen in return for public contracts.

The long list of PP politicians who received cash payments include Rajoy, Rodrigo Rato (former minister

of the economy, first deputy prime minister and subsequently managing director of the International Monetary Fund), Jaime Mayor Oreja (former interior minister), Francisco Álvarez-Cascos (former first vice president of the government and regional president of Asturias), Javier Arenas (leader of the PP in Andalusia), Ángel Acebes (former minister of the interior) and María Dolores de Cospedal (current PP general secretary and regional president of Castilla-la Mancha).

On Monday, Bárcenas appeared at the High Court in Madrid to answer questions about new revelations published in *El Mundo* at the weekend, which included an interview between the newspaper director and Bárcenas, who admitted, after months of denials, that he was the author of the secret ledgers published by *El País* in January. The newspaper also published a series of screen shots of SMS messages between Rajoy and Bárcenas showing that they had been in contact at least up until March 6 this year, contradicting Rajoy's assertions that he couldn't remember the last time he "had spoken with that individual."

After the investigation began in January, Rajoy sent a message to Bárcenas pleading with him to stay calm. He texted, "Luis, that is not true. Why do you want to cause trouble? I spoke to her.... This isn't an easy situation. Mistakes can't be made. Keep your composure because that is the last thing that you can lose. Regards."

"Her" is a reference to De Cospedal, whom Bárcenas blames for his abandonment by the party. Three days later, Rajoy sent Bárcenas another message, "Luis, nothing is easy, but we will do what we can. Keep your chin up."

The relationship between the two men started to deteriorate in mid-February. The last message by

Bárcenas to Rajoy stated, “Mariano, the party lawyer’s behaviour this afternoon was embarrassing. They didn’t allow the people that I sent over to check the contents of the boxes that were inside the office you gave me authorisation to use. Only you know what you are playing with, but I am free from all my commitments with you and the party.”

Indirect contacts between Bárcenas and the PP leadership continued until late May through PP lawyers who attempted to convince him to remain silent. For a while the former treasurer complied, insisting the ledgers were a forgery. This all changed when the party ostracised him and he was imprisoned.

In Monday’s High Court appearance Bárcenas handed over further incriminating documents and declared that he “paid Rajoy and Cospedal in cash in 2008, 2009 and 2010”, including €25,000 to each of them in 2010 in €500 banknotes. He claimed Rajoy was fully aware of the way the party was being illegally financed.

Both Rajoy and Cospedal are denying the allegations. On Monday, Rajoy told a press conference that he was being “blackmailed”. He did not allow the journalist from *El Mundo* to ask questions and instead skipped to another journalist from the pro-PP *ABC* who asked an already agreed question. On the same day, Cospedal “emphatically” denied Bárcenas’s accusations in court, describing them as “slander” by a “criminal” who is in jail.

The PP has attempted to silence Bárcenas, with its lawyers allegedly threatening to send his wife to prison if he talked. In the prison where Bárcenas is being held, guards have been ordered to control all communications between him and lawyers, other prisoners and his wife, who has been banned from writing to her husband since the *El Mundo* revelations.

The slush-fund scandal has caused a crisis within the PP. The most hard-line wing, which has never accepted the Rajoy leadership after it removed the old guard around José María Aznar, who served as prime minister 1996 to 2004, has gone on the offensive. “It is clear there is a battle for power going on, fought out through the media from the right wing of the party,” a leading businessman close to the PP told reporters.

Aznar has publicly criticised the way the PP leadership has dealt with the Bárcenas scandal, but shied away from calling for Rajoy’s resignation. Other

PP leaders have not been so reticent.

Esperanza Aguirre, the former premier of the Madrid regional government, stated, “If there have been people who have fallen into corruption, we have to discover and denounce them”, and has called for a recognition of “irregularities” in the party’s finance. Vice President of the European Parliament Alejo Vidal-Quadras and other PP members has asked De Cospedal to convene an extraordinary National Board Committee meeting to discuss changing the leadership. Another unnamed senior PP leader told reporters, “The situation is unbearable. It’s impossible for a government to function with this focus on the scandal. The solution is to elect a new leader in the party.”

The PSOE has announced it will move a motion of censure in Congress against Rajoy and is seeking the support of other opposition parties if he does not answer questions from investigators about the Bárcenas case. PSOE leader Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba has warned that the political ramifications of the scandal “affect the stability of the country”—in other words, it affects the imposition of austerity, cuts and privatizations that have been imposed by both PSOE and PP governments.

The PSOE’s move is aimed at channelling all the popular anger against the corrupt government towards a parliamentary debate that in all probability will be blocked by the PP’s majority in parliament. The PP has 185 deputies in the 350-member parliament.

Popular anger is to some degree reflected in the growing support for the Communist Party-led United Left, which is polling 16.6 percent compared to 3.8 percent in the 2011 general election. Support for the PP has declined from 40 percent in 2011 to 23 percent, while that for the PSOE has slumped even more precipitously, from 44 percent to 21.6 percent.



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