

King Juan Carlos of Spain - A King and a Democrat -

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Abstract

The Spanish democracy today is a good example of a sound economic and political success. To some extent this success is indebted to King Juan Carlos, almost a kind of providential figure, who has played his role as a constitutional sovereign skillfully and bravely, acting in his country's best interest. Until Franco's death in 1975, Prince Juan Carlos lived in the shadow of El Caudillo, trying to figure out what kind of future role the dictator was planning for him. But these long years of uncertainty and solitude helped Juan Carlos carve his identity as a statesman and monarch. He learned to watch, to listen and to be quiet, which are, simultaneously, a constitutional monarch's rights and responsibilities.

Key words

Spanish constitutional monarchy, King Juan Carlos

One of the best definitions that captures the essence of a constitutional monarchy is the one given by Christian Cannuyer in his book "The Royal and Sovereign Houses of Europe": "Humane and sacred, sovereign and anarchic, natural and irrational, familiar and distant, useless and indispensable at the same time, the monarchy is as paradoxical as the age we live in. Its anachronistic character guarantees its modernity" [1, 17]. Although after World War I Europe witnessed the collapse of many of its monarchies, the end of the XXth century is marked by Spain's re-assertion of the validity of the monarchic system as a realistic and operable system of government.

Never before in its history has Spain managed to achieve so much, in such short time and with so little human sacrifice than during the reign of King Juan Carlos I of Spain. In about a quarter of a century, the country has crystallized and strengthened its democratic institutions, has become an important member of the European Union and its economy boosted.

Initially regarded by many as a prince with no personal views or convictions, a puppet of Franco's regime with little chances of success once El Caudillo died, nicknamed Juan Carlos The Ephemeral, the King of Spain has proved to be a genuine constitutional monarch and a wise and authentic democrat, who skillfully reigns but does not govern. About Juan Carlos Salvador Dali used to say that "he is for Spain the best king not because he would be the most intelligent or beautiful, but because he is, as the son of a king, superior by birth to others" [1, 17]. It is not only the act of birth itself that makes a royal prince and future monarch superior to others, but the way in which the son of a king understands to fulfill his duties and responsibilities and be fully committed to his destiny. The particular circumstances in which Juan Carlos was sent to Madrid to be raised by Franco as his successor and the way in which this unprecedented experience shaped the personality and the style of the future king very well explain the evolution of this modern monarch.

In 1931, because of growing social unrest and the threat of a civil war, King Alphonse XIII of Spain, Juan Carlos's grandfather exiled himself without abdicating. He was followed by his family and the heir to the Spanish throne, the Earl of Barcelona, Juan Carlos's father. The royal family initially moved to Italy, then to Switzerland and finally to Portugal. In Spain the Second Republic was proclaimed on April 14th 1931. The Popular Front took over the political power in 1936, bringing about a military uprising led by General Francisco Franco. A civil war broke out which lasted until 1939 when Franco and his supporters won the war and set up a military dictatorship that was to last until Franco's death in 1975. Paradoxically, the monarchy was not abolished but formally re-established in 1947 by a referendum according to which 92, 94% of the votes were in favour of the monarchy. Practically speaking, Spain was back then a monarchy without a king on the throne, with the political power concentrated in the hands of a military dictator whose successor was the son of the legitimate heir to the Spanish throne.

On August 25th 1948, General Franco and the Earl of Barcelona met on board of the dictator's ship to discuss the future education of Juan Carlos. The two decided to send the young prince to be educated in Spain. By this settlement, the Earl of Barcelona, on one hand, hoped that his status as Prince of Asturias and heir to the Spanish throne be recognized. For Franco, on the other hand, the presence of Juan Carlos in Spain meant nothing but a means of making his political regime be accepted by Western Europe. So, on November 9th 1948, Prince Juan Carlos, only ten years old, came to Spain. Long years of uncertainty followed and it was not until 1969 that the prince was appointed Franco's successor. When asked what he

learned from Franco, the King answered: “I learned to watch, to listen and to be quiet” [4, 37].

With his military training completed under all arms and freshly married to the Greek Princess Sofia, daughter of King Paul of the Hellenes, the prince faced a vacuum of activities and official responsibilities. Trying to avoid the danger of becoming an amoeba, Juan Carlos confronted Franco about his role. And Franco replied: “Do so that the Spanish people get to know you.” [4, 72]. The future king then started to study the system of the public administration spending two or three months in different ministries. Together with his wife, Princess Sofia, he traveled extensively, visiting as many cities and villages as possible, letting the Spanish know him and his views, he kept close contact with the politicians of the day and the army representatives. So when Juan Carlos was proclaimed King in 1975, the public had a clear image of who their king was.

For many, the King was the providential figure Spain needed. But in his own words, the King was “the right man, in the right place, at the right moment” [4, 86-87]. The days following his proclamation as King were days of intense suspense. The King could not know for sure how Franco’s Movement would react, what the position of the Left would be or what the attitude of the Communist Party, still illegal, would be. In its turn, the political spectrum was also not sure of the measures the King would take.

One of the most complicated situations was that the new King was expected to swear, in the Spanish Parliament, to remain loyal to Franco’s principles. The King was aware that these principles had to be abolished because by not doing so the old dictatorial regime would survive. Torcuato Tasso, President of the Spanish Parliament advised the King to swear to maintain the principles “that we would later change one by one” [4, 86]. Little did the Spanish know that one year after becoming king, Juan Carlos was to ask the Parliament to produce a new democratic constitution. On December 6th 1978 this constitution was ratified by popular referendum. 87.8% of those who had the right to vote supported the new constitution.

In order to democratize the political life of the country, the King knew he had to assume some very disagreeable responsibilities. A very controversial issue was the fate and the role of the Communist Party, led by Santiago Carrillo, in Spain’s new political life. As a result of the Civil War, the army and many members of the general public opposed the legalization of the Communist Party. But in order to

build a true democracy, the King knew that it was important that all political parties became legal, including the Communist Party. This way the communists were forced to unveil a lot of data about themselves. Once legal, they had to present their agenda, their attitude towards the monarchy, the number of their members. This was a wise move made by the King because in so doing the communists could no longer claim that they spoke on behalf of the people of Spain. Their political influence was annihilated.

Another delicate problem was the situation in Catalonia, a province that claimed not only its autonomy but also its independence. Under Franco, for whom Spanish territorial integrity was sacrosanct, many Catalan leaders left the province and went to leave abroad. One of them was Don Josep Tarradellas, a republican, president of the autonomous government of Catalonia, who lived in exile in Saint-Martin-Le-Beau, France. In order to find a viable solution to the problem, the King asked Tarradellas to return to Spain. The move allowed the King to “temper the Catalans’ impatience on one hand and on the other hand, to stop any military violence because once Tarradellas took his seat as head of the government of Catalonia, the danger of a political success of the Left, with its claims of independence, vanished” [4, 108].

Little by little the public opinion understood the changes brought about by the King. Many Spanish citizens who were not necessarily monarchy supporters became Juan-Carlists, supporters and admirers of the King, accepting and approving of his democratic and often radical measures. The legalization of the Communist Party and the fact that Catalonia was allowed to have its own autonomous government prove that the Spanish monarchy, too, has undergone a profound change. If the monarchy of King Alphonse XIII was that of one social class (supporting the political Right), under his nephew, King Juan Carlos, the monarchy belonged to all classes and political parties.

But the moment of the King’s recognition, when he could show his country and the world that he was the right choice for Spain, “the right man, in the right place, at the right moment” was February 23rd 1981, when armed officers and soldiers of the Spanish army entered the Parliament building, arresting all the Parliament members and the members of the government, in an attempt to destroy the democratic political life of the country. The rebels were commanded by lieutenant-colonel Antonio Tejero, a supporter of Franco’s principles. Other superior army officers were involved, among whom General Milans del Bosch, General of the III Military Region, one of Spain’s greatest generals. Once the King was informed

about the situation in the Parliament, he gathered all his collaborators around him, established contacts with all the generals of the Spanish army and started the longest night of his reign. The king metaphorically paralleled the situation of the Spanish monarchy that night with “a football still rolling in the air, not knowing where it might land” [4, 166]. The situation was very sensitive, the King running the risk of infringing his own prerogatives, his royal prerogatives.

Since all the members of the government and the Parliament were held captive inside the Parliament building, there was a vacuum of legitimized power. The King’s main concern was to fill this vacuum, but legally. On one hand, he could give orders to the army officers because he was the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. On the other hand, the secretaries of state and the undersecretaries of state that were not present in the Parliament that day formed a commission presided over by Francisco Laina, with the scope of maintaining the governmental continuity, commission to which the King could not impose his point of view even though Francisco Laina did not do anything without first talking to the King. To make matters worse, the Spanish Public Television was occupied by rebel forces so the public did not know and could not know whether the King was involved or not in this coup d’état, whether or not he supported the rebels. The King was unable to communicate with his people, to let them know what his position was. As the night went on, the King managed to establish contact with all the generals, ordering them to keep their troops in the barracks. He also realized that General Milans del Bosch was one of the rebels and let him know that Juan Carlos was aware of his involvement. Meanwhile, a Spanish television team managed to leave the building and arrive at La Zarzuela, the royal residence, where the King, wearing his uniform of General of Army Corps, was waiting to deliver his speech that the whole country was waiting for. In his speech, the King let the country know that he took all the necessary measures to maintain the legal constitutional order. Soon afterwards the Spanish people were able to watch their sovereign on TV and sighed with relief that their King had the situation under control.

It is important to mention that, during the night of February 23rd 1981, Prince Felipe, the Prince of Asturias, only 13 years old, was asked by his father to stay awake and watch what was happening around him. Several times during the night the young prince fell asleep but each time he was quickly woken up by the King, telling his son: “Felipe, don’t sleep! Pay attention to what you have to do when you are king!”[4, 167]. This is a fine example of how princes are trained in becoming constitutional monarchs and how they learn what it is expected of them when they

become kings. The night of February 23rd seems to have been the ultimate test for King Juan Carlos, the line between reigning and ruling being a very thin one. But the King proved to have become a wise and skillful statesman, able to assume difficult responsibilities when the situation called while making sure that the constitutional principles are respected.

Whenever he had the opportunity, the King of Spain stated that he could not have been able to manage the February 1981 crises without the help of the Spanish Army. Although those responsible for that coup d'état were members of the army, the King always drew attention to the fact that those officers were just a few rebellious elements and it was not fair to hold all the army responsible. On the contrary, the majority of the Spanish army proved to be a defender of the country's democratic process and loyal to the King and the Crown. There is a similarity between Spain's situation in February 1981 and Greece's situation in April 1967. Perhaps the example of King Constantine II of the Hellenes, King Juan Carlos's brother-in-law, deposed by a group of colonels, was a sound lesson. The contacts between King Constantine and his army seemed to have been less profound than those of the King of Spain. The fact that the King's military training and education involved all the arms and the King's close connections with the Spanish military environment guaranteed a very good, open and honest communication between the King and his army that proved to be decisive in crucial circumstances.

Thirty years ago it would have been practically impossible to believe that one day Spain would follow the example of the Scandinavian constitutional monarchies, being itself a sound constitutional monarchy governed by a socialist government supporting the involvement of women in the political life of the country, a government whose almost half of its members are women. Isn't this the confirmation that King Juan Carlos of Spain is an authentic democrat?

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