

## Holding Spain together -- again

PARIS. Today, May Day, is the worldwide (except North America) Labour Day. As good a day as any to remember how workers, peasants, anarcho-syndicalists, Stalinists, Trotskyites, soldiers, fascists, Nazis and Catholic clergy tore Spain to pieces 70 years ago. How Basque and Catalán separatists are testing the unity -- cultural, moral and constitutional -- of Spain today. And how a brave king has served his people well for three decades.

Lean, plain-faced King Juan Carlos, now 68, has helped Spain bury its bloody past and prepare its challenging future. After extreme-right Nationalists defeated leftwing Republican forces in the 1936-39 Civil War, fascist dictator Francisco Franco ran a vicious police state. He tortured, murdered or exiled hundreds of thousands of his Republican adversaries -- the latter abandoned by western democracies, but helped by Moscow. The Catholic Church backed Franco for four decades.

Franco hoped to entrench his totalitarian system by personally supervising the education of his young designated successor, Juan Carlos, son of Juan de Borbón. But after Franco's 1975 death, Juan Carlos patiently launched a transition to democracy. This demanded tactical brilliance and steely nerves. Old-line *franquistas* and leftists threatened to restart the civil war. Long-suppressed regional autonomists grew restive.

Finding far-seeing allies, Juan Carlos was able gradually to weaken the old guard and pave the way for elections. A handful of democrats -- notably Adolfo Suárez and Socialist Felipe González -- backed him. Dodging and weaving, Juan Carlos built popular support by exploiting a 1976 U.S. trip to announce Spain's democratic evolution. A month later he fired a recalcitrant *franquista* prime minister. Elections ensued in 1977 and 1979. Juan Carlos led his people to freedom.

In February 1981, *franquismo*'s death-rattle echoed in Parliament as a gang led by Lt.-Col. Antonio Tejero of the feared *Guardia Civil* invaded the chamber with a small gang. They shot at the ceiling, announcing the assembly dissolved. That night was Juan Carlos's finest hour. He went on TV in full uniform as commander-in-chief and ordered all soldiers and police back to barracks. The revolt collapsed. Spaniards' young king became a hero, and trusted guarantor of Spain's freedoms and unity. On 28, 1982, election of González's Socialist Party marked the formal beginning of a lasting Spanish democracy.

When Juan Carlos came to Paris last month on a state visit, mass demonstrations against the French government's timid labour reforms almost overshadowed his historic accomplishment: reconciling Spaniards with democracy and each other. But keen observers praised the king's first-ever visit to the hundreds of thousands of exiled Republicans in southern France. They applauded his words comforting warriors on both sides of the 1930s civil war. They noted that, in liaison with the Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the king favoured measured autonomy for Basque, Catalanian and perhaps other regions.

These growing centrifugal tensions are the biggest threat to Spain today. After murdering over 800 innocents in 30 years, the masked cowards of the Basque terrorist group ETA recently declared an end to violence. Skepticism remains about their commitment to democracy. But the king's rock-solid defence of Spanish unity, plus his

democratic credentials, open-mindedness and popularity, strengthen Zapatero's hand in risking new freedoms for the regions.

Today's Spain is a tough place to govern. Although its free-enterprise economy is booming, regional ambitions threaten. Spaniards – passionate yet pragmatic, stubborn yet sensible, earthy yet poetic, are never an easy people to manage. Regions have distinct personalities, all of them proud.

Machismo? Not what it used to be. Half of Zapatero's ministers are women. Post-Franco society has exploded into one of the most egalitarian, women-friendly in Europe. Laws on divorce and abortion are liberalized, those on domestic violence tougher. Over 40 percent of women work outside the home. Spain's birthrate is one of the lowest in the world. Same-sex marriage is legal.

"History wars" divide Nationalists from Republicans. Old-line *franquistas* still try to present Franco as a hero. Leftists want compensation for Franco's crimes. But Zapatero, a reconciler even though Franco's people shot his grandfather, wants to replace anniversaries glorifying one side or the other with remembrance of the democracy-saving king's coronation 31 years ago.

Today, on this workers' holiday, king and prime minister symbolize a rich, modern Spain coming to terms with itself. Zapatero's Socialist Workers' Party, matching free enterprise with workers' rights, has promoted foreign and domestic peace. Zapatero pulled Spain out of George Bush's Iraq. And building on Spain's rich Muslim history, he preaches, with Turkey, an "Alliance of Civilizations."

Both Juan Carlos and Zapatero are burying the Civil War's ghosts. In this, they heed Franco-assassinated poet Federico García Lorca's warning: "In Spain, the dead are more alive than the dead of any other country in the world."