

# Four Decades of Triumph and Trials

**Paul Preston** traces the rise of King Juan Carlos de Borbón as a national hero, and a popular legitimacy to which the new King can only aspire

**T**he reign of Juan Carlos de Borbón is the story of how the man nominated by Franco as the successor intended to prolong his dictatorship by achieving massive popular legitimacy in a democracy. To match that legitimacy is the greatest challenge his successor faces. Juan Carlos threw off the shackles of the dictator's laws and institutions and played a central role in ensuring a relatively bloodless transition to democracy.

From 1969 to 1977, he managed to juggle the apparently incompatible objectives of fidelity to the principles of the Francoist single-party state and commitment to establishing a democratic constitutional monarchy. Between 1977 and 1982, he courageously defended democracy from the threat of military conspiracy. Thereafter, he became a national hero.

## The Formative Years

Torn from his family in 1948, 10-year-old prince became a hostage to give a veneer of royal approval to Franco's indefinite assumption of the role of regent. When he was old enough, a two year period in the Military Academy of Zaragoza, six months in the air force and navy academies, then time spent in various civilian ministries and incessant journeys around Spain gave Juan Carlos a sense of the huge sociological changes underway and the desire of many Spaniards for some kind of future democratic reform. Moreover, his wife Sofía's experience of exile with the Greek Royal Family brought a hard realism to her assessment of the Spanish situation. She reiterated what her husband already knew: that the only route to the throne was via a rapprochement with the Caudillo and that the only way to stay on the throne was via democracy.

In 1969, Juan Carlos was designated as Franco's heir, a decision which



broke both with the continuity and the legitimacy of the Borbón line. The new monarchy was intended to be Franco's and Franco's alone. The fact that today the heir is about to be the constitutional monarch is confirmation that Juan Carlos betrayed Franco's trust. To swear fidelity to the Fundamental Laws caused Juan Carlos considerable anxiety. He needed reassurance that the oath of loyalty would not chain him to the regime in its present form and his legal advisors convinced him that all Franco's Laws could be reformed or even repealed. Franco expected his successor to continue the dictatorship, seeing him as a mere figurehead, with the steely Admiral Carrero Blanco to keep him on the path of true Francoism.

## Commitment to Democratisation

When Carrero Blanco was assassinated in December 1973, Franco humiliated Juan Carlos by excluding him from the decision to nominate the hardliner Carlos Arias Navarro as Carrero's replacement. Juan Carlos was obliged to watch helplessly as Arias Navarro drifted directionless through the waves of inflation and working class militancy that followed the energy crisis.

After Franco's death on November 20, 1975, the next six months were nerve-wracking for the new King. His first task was to neutralise the supporters of Franco, while his advisors, notably Torcuato Fernández Miranda, prepared the political reform project. For six months, he had to keep on Arias Navarro as Prime Minister while trying to convince the Left of his commitment to democratisation.

The big leap forward came in the summer of 1976 with the appointment of Adolfo Suárez as the Prime Minister to take charge of the next crucial stage of the process. It was a major gamble and the fate of the monarchy hinged on his success or failure. The King 'risked his crown' but his public appearances as commander-in-chief and his private meetings with officers helped restrain military hostility to the democratic process. This is an advantage which the future King Felipe does not possess although he might not face some of the hostility that confronted his father.

## Defeating the Military Coup

After the elections of June 1977, democracy would be viable only when both the Army and the majority of the

Basque people were brought into the democratic fold. The anti-democratic violence of Right and Left would bedevil the task of constructing a widely acceptable constitutional framework and royal support was to be crucial for the consolidation of democracy. The government needed his constant vigilance as supreme commander of the Armed Forces because democracy remained in danger. It required his tireless efforts to prevent it being crushed between the hammer of Basque terrorism and the anvil of military subversion. As ETA terrorism intensified, the descent into violence served the interests of the ultra-Right directly. The backlash inevitably reached the King and he became the object of extreme Right-wing hostility.

When Adolfo Suárez resigned at the end of January 1981, military pressure grew for a coalition headed by a general. Juan Carlos resisted that pressure and played a key role in defeating the military coup of February 23, 1981. The coup marked a turning point not only in the transition to democracy, but also in the role of the King. The King's own sense of exasperation was expressed in his later comment to the leaders of the main parties wherein he stressed that his role should not have been that of the fireman of democracy, always ready to put out a fire.

### A Sense of Duty - At the Core of His Existence

After the substantial Socialist victory in the elections of October 28, 1982, Juan Carlos no longer had to be called out as a 'fireman' and, henceforth, he became more of a Constitutional Head of State in the manner of Queen Elizabeth II of England. Nevertheless, the twin problems of Basque terrorism and military subversion remained and there were ETA plots to assassinate him in June 1985, December 1986 and October 1997. Juan Carlos relations with Catalonia, while not without difficulty, were significantly easier. He worked at both consolidating Catalonia's presence within Spain's new democracy, and augmenting the royal popularity in the region by means of numerous visits to Barcelona. Nevertheless, anti-monarchical sentiments from the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya remain a source of virulent criticism well into the 21st century. This will be the first acute problem facing King Felipe.

The King was most active and effective in his tireless trips abroad. Visits to France and Germany were crucial in the process of Spain's integration into the European Community. Similarly, his cultivation

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of President Mitterrand contributed to securing French cooperation in the struggle against ETA. The King also did a lot to consolidate the image of Spain in Latin America, as well as encouraging the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the region, especially in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay.

Juan Carlos also had good relations with a number of Arab countries, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, as a result of which Spain enjoyed secure oil supplies. The links with the Arab world were the basis of rumours that he had received financial support from the richer Middle Eastern monarchies. This in turn would be linked, throughout the 1990s, to efforts to smear his image by association with the financial scandals that were to bedevil Spanish political life and severely damaged Juan Carlos's image.

### His Turn to Enjoy 'El Descanso Del Guerrero'

Gossip magazines also made much of his obsession with speed and expensive sports in which he risked his life and frequently caused him serious accidents and injuries. His enthusiasm for beautiful women was the object of prurient attention in some parts of the weekly press. Having

the time now to cultivate his own interests, his friends and his caprices exposed him to morbid, or even hostile scrutiny.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most vehement criticisms emanated from the Right-wing press and radio, especially the COPE. This reflected their outrage at his cordial relations with Felipe González and from 2004 with José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero. In fact, Juan Carlos provided a neutral headship of State helping to diminish the bitter divisions of Civil War. The persistent rumours about financial irregularities and romantic entanglements obscured the abnegation and sense of duty, which lay at the core of his existence.

A sense of disenchantment with the monarchy became more generalised during the economic crisis after 2010. As the pinnacle of the political system, the monarchy was affected by the general sense of resentment of the corruption of the elite. Accusations of that corruption reached the royal family exactly at the moment when the King, tired after years of dedication to Spanish democracy, seems to have decided that it was his turn to enjoy 'el descanso del guerrero'.

The combination of both problems contributed to a major loss of popularity. The decision to abdicate indicates, as did his complex role in the transition, a man who is intelligent, strong-minded and motivated by a deep patriotism. Perhaps convinced that there is little chance of recuperating the popularity which has to be the basis of the monarchy's survival, or simply too tired to try, the King has decided to 'cortar por lo sano' in order to give his son the best chance possible of remaining on the throne for a long time. Whether the gamble will pay off depends now on the new King, on whether he can dissociate himself from the negativity that has afflicted the throne recently, on how he comports himself in relation to the Catalan crisis and on the possibility of an economic recovery that will dissipate fears of a Republican revival.



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