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## Adolfo Suárez, The Man Who Came After Franco

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The death of Adolfo Suárez—who served as Spain’s first democratically elected Prime Minister, from 1977 to 1981, following the death of Francisco Franco—marks a milestone for Spain. Suárez was a ruling-party loyalist of some obscurity when he was first appointed to the office by King Juan Carlos, who had assumed the throne just days after Franco’s death, in November, 1975. Suárez then won office in Spain’s first free vote since 1936, and helped direct the country’s tenuous steps toward democracy for the next four years, earning him widespread praise as the architect of Spain’s vaunted transition from dictatorship. Suárez earned additional plaudits for

facing down two hundred armed members of the Civil Guard when they invaded Spain's Cortes, or parliament, at 6:30 P.M. on February 23, 1981, during a special session called to appoint his successor.

While most of the politicians present cowered or threw themselves on the floor, Suárez and his deputy held their ground in open defiance of the gun-toting ultra-rightists, who fired shots in the air and trained their weapons on Suárez. (The other politician who comported himself well that day was Santiago Carrillo, the veteran Communist Party leader, who had returned to Spain after years in exile, thanks to a secret deal that Suárez offered him: legalization of the Communist Party in exchange for its commitment to the electoral process.) Suárez was taken captive and held under armed guard in a room at the Cortes for the duration of the attempted coup, which ended the next morning, after King Juan Carlos made clear, in a televised address at 1 A.M., that the rebels did not have his backing. King Juan Carlos has long been lionized for his role in that affair—for coming out in favor of democracy. This is so despite his unexplained seven-hour delay in making the announcement. Juan Carlos had been a protégé of the dictator, entrusted to carry on his right-wing form of rule. But, at a decisive moment, Juan Carlos and Suárez turned out to have more democratic bones in their bodies than their lives under Franco had ever suggested.

Later that year, following Suárez's retirement—he was replaced by another center-right politician, Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo—King Juan Carlos made him a duke, and a Grandee of Spain.

Coming thirty-eight years after the death of the old Caudillo, Suárez's passing may provide some welcome retrospectives by Spaniards seeking something positive to say about their country, which has been in the grip of an extended malaise as it struggles to come out of one of Europe's worst economic recessions. Spain's economy, based largely on an unrestrained construction boom and real-estate bubble, crashed in 2009. Few E.U. countries besides Greece have taken a nosedive of such spectacular proportions, one that has resulted in five years of economic stagnation, a twenty-five-per-cent national unemployment rate, slashed public services, an exodus of immigrant workers, a sustained brain drain of young professionals seeking paying jobs abroad—and a public debt that currently stands at nearly a hundred per cent of G.D.P. Add to this a poisonous debate over national unity and identity as Catalonia, an autonomous province, pushes ahead with plans to hold a controversial referendum later this year on obtaining independence, and proposed legislation by Spain's conservative government to reintroduce a stringent, and socially divisive, abortion ban.

Even the country's monarchy, seen as the ultimate social glue ever since Juan Carlos's role in the transition, has plummeted in popularity, owing to a scandal involving the King's son-in-law, and a gaffe, in 2012, in which the King revealed that he had gone on an elephant-hunting trip to Botswana—a junket paid for by a Saudi lobbyist—with a woman who was not his wife, Queen Sofia. The King made a public apology, but the damage to his reputation, and to the monarchy, may have been permanent.

On Tuesday, I asked Paul Preston, the author of a renowned biography of Franco, and one of the King, how he viewed Suárez's legacy. Preston chose his words carefully: "After the death of Franco, there was a colossal social demand for change, which faced the determined opposition of the armed forces and the extreme right. What Suárez did was to help the King broker an agreement between the moderate left and the more progressive followers of Franco. Suárez was a sinuous negotiator, and he also had a terrific media presence, which helped sell the limited transition to the wider public."

That transition, which included what came to be called a "pact of oblivion" between Spain's new political order and the outgoing dictatorship, has prevented subsequent generations of Spaniards from prosecuting crimes committed under Franco's long rule, not to mention during the brutal Civil War of 1936-39, which preceded it. As a consequence, the traumas of the past remain alive for many Spaniards today. While acknowledging the transition's limitations, Preston believes that it was carried out in the only way it could have been, and does not fault Suárez for its deficiencies.

"At the time, there was no choice, given the hostility to democracy of the armed forces, including the Civil Guard and the police," Preston said. He talked about other damaging aspects of Suárez's legacy—most of all, the way the regional nationalism of Catalonia and the Basque country were addressed with "artificial constructs" that "burdened Spain with colossal costs and endless opportunities for corruption." But, regarding Franco's

unresolved legacy, he said, “The failure to break the chains of the past should rather be attributed to the excessive caution of those who followed Suárez.”

A dashing handsome man, Suárez lived his final years off the public stage, invisibly, suffering from Alzheimer’s. In 2005, his son announced that his father could no longer remember that he had once governed Spain.

*Photograph courtesy Hulton Archive/Getty.*

### Keywords

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