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Juan Carlos guided Spain to democracy, recent years clouded by graft scandal

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(Reuters) - King Juan Carlos, who announced plans to abdicate on Monday, helped guide Spain to democracy after the death of dictator Francisco Franco, but his 40-year reign was clouded at its end by a graft scandal and accusations he was out of touch

with the economic suffering of his people.

The reign of Juan Carlos, 76, is best known for a television broadcast he made in the early hours of February 24, 1981 condemning a revolt by right-wing military officers aggrieved by democratic reforms. Television footage of the leader of the rebels firing his revolver in parliament to cow deputies had been shown across the world.

"The crown, symbol of the permanence and unity of the motherland, cannot tolerate any actions or attitudes by persons who intend to interrupt the democratic process by force," he said to a nation on tenterhooks the night of the coup attempt.

Despite suspicions among some on the left that he had originally encouraged the attempted putsch, Juan Carlos went on to earn the respect of notable, long-standing republicans.

"If the king had not been there on February 23 the military coup would have triumphed - of that I have no doubt," veteran Communist Party leader Santiago Carrillo, who spent about 40 years in exile during Franco's reign, told Reuters in 2001.

As a monarch, Juan Carlos and his wife, Queen Sophia, came across as warm and approachable, in contrast to more distant British royals. The king is a passionate sailor and also enjoyed bear hunting, skiing and motorbiking.

But Spanish media traditionally treated the royal family with a deference that would be the envy of British counterparts, eschewing more controversial aspects of his life.

A graft scandal had eroded the king's popularity in recent years. His daughter Princess Cristina and her husband, Inaki Urdangarin, are under investigation over alleged embezzlement of 6 million euros in public funds through his charity.

He himself faced accusations of being out of touch when caught on a lavish privately-funded elephant-hunting trip while Spaniards at home were suffering deep and sustained economic recession and high unemployment.

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His unexpected decision to abdicate in favor of his son Prince Felipe was announced by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. He said the king, whose health is failing and who has had five operations in two years, was stepping down on personal grounds.

Sources at the royal palace cited political reasons.

Some critics had initially seen the king as a puppet chosen by Franco, who had ruled Spain for decades after winning a long civil war in 1939. Franco had declared himself head of state but was also de facto regent since the royal family was in exile.

Juan Carlos was crowned two days after Franco's death, on Nov. 22, 1975. Franco officially designated Juan Carlos as his successor in 1969, but had groomed him since 1948, when the future king first set foot in Spain at the age of 10.

Right-wing diehards had expected the king to continue with Franco's authoritarian style and felt betrayed when he paved the way for Spain to adopt a democratic constitution in 1978.

SPONTANEOUS HUGS

He cemented his popularity with gestures such as hugging Spanish captain Iker Castillas after his side won the European football championship in 2008, or when he famously put down Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez at a 2007 summit.

The king's irritated outburst of "Why don't you shut up!" during a typically long-winded Chavez speech instantly became the most popular ring tone in Spain.

His humble apology for the elephant-hunting incident, when he shuffled out of his hospital room after hip surgery and muttered "I'm very sorry. I made a mistake and it won't happen again" helped mend his reputation with many Spaniards.

Juan Carlos's early years were marked by tragedy, family exile and a tug-of-war between his father and Franco.

Juan Carlos Alfonso Victor Maria Borbon y Borbon-Dos Sicilias was born Jan. 5, 1938, on the eve of World War Two in Rome, where the Spanish royals lived after fleeing Spain when it became a republic in 1931.

Journalists and historians have said the hands-off approach to the family after its return was needed to safeguard a young and fragile democracy, although critics have said this amounted to censorship.

"We've had democracy for 30 years now," said Senator Inaki Añazagasti in 2010, a leading critic of the monarchy. "The media have been too benevolent towards the king in a democratic state."

Very few Spaniards, for example, know about a fatal shooting accident when the king was 18. His younger brother Alfonso died in 1956 aged 15 in the family home in Portugal. A statement cleared by Franco said Alfonso was killed while cleaning a gun with his brother.

However, historian Paul Preston, in his 2003 biography on the King, says it is a widely accepted fact today that Juan Carlos' finger was "on the trigger" when the gun was fired.

Juan Carlos's youth was also marred by a rocky relationship with his father after he agreed to be Franco's successor and king, although Don Juan was heir to the throne and did not renounce his dynastic rights until May 1977.

The king was educated in Switzerland, Portugal and later in armed forces academies in Spain and was often seen wearing military uniform.

He married Princess Sophia of Greece, the eldest daughter of King Paul I and Queen Federica, in 1962.

The king and queen have three children and eight grandchildren. His only son and youngest child, Felipe, married Letizia Ortiz, a television news presenter, in May 2004.

(Reporting By Paul Day)