

all the KING'S men

**A Journey
into the
World of
Spanish Politics**

with Elena Suárez

Imagine living in one of the most backward countries in Western Europe. A country ruled by the longest serving fascist dictator of the twentieth century, who murdered and oppressed thousands of people both during and after one of the most brutal civil wars in modern Europe. Think what it must be like to live in a country where you are not allowed to speak your provincial dialect. Where the police are a fearsome paramilitary force. Where the law is arbitrary and the media controlled by the state.

Consider a creaking infrastructure and a population existing mostly at subsistence level. To make matters worse, imagine an uncertain future with a dying dictator. Perhaps you are in your mid-fifties and, as a young man, fought in the civil war, with nightmare memories of drawn blood still fresh. Maybe you, or a member of your family, were an oppressor during the dark years after the war and are awaiting the vengeance of others upon the demise of the regime.

This was Spain in the early 1970s. Only some 35 years ago. A potentially volatile and fractious state. And yet now, Spain is a triumphantly secure democracy in which a return to a dictatorship (left or right wing) would be unthinkable. Just as incredible has been the transition of Spain from a poor and backward country to a nation that now boasts the 9th

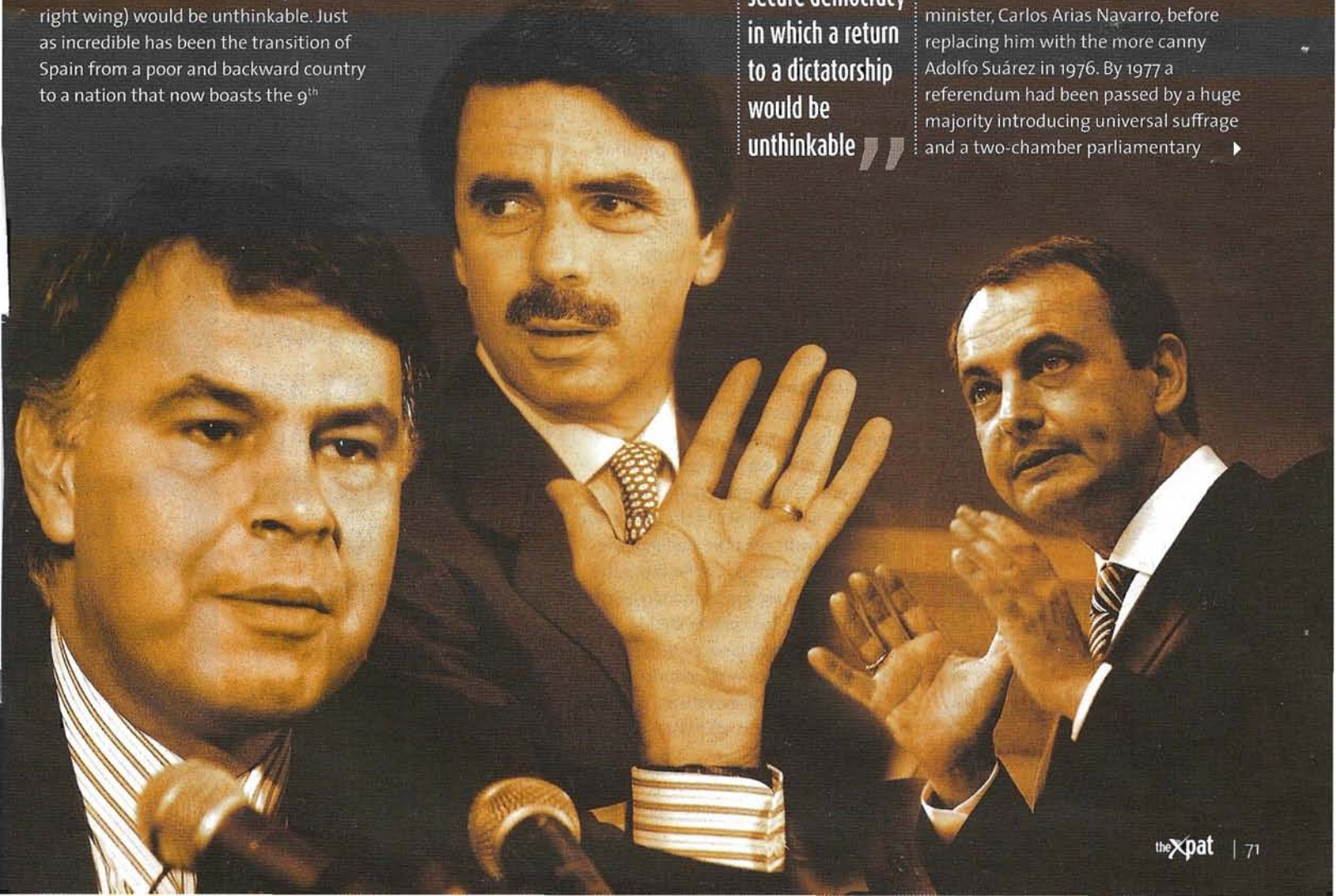
largest economy in the world and the 5th biggest in the EU. Remarkably, all of this has been achieved through almost entirely peaceful means - despite barely closed wounds.

General Franco had certainly not envisaged a parliamentary democracy after his death and would have been appalled to think that a socialist party (PSOE) would take power and go on to govern the country for 14 consecutive years. In 1969 he had anointed the future king, Juan Carlos I, as his successor and head of state, envisaging a continuing dictatorship - albeit under an absolute monarch.

“ Spain is a triumphantly secure democracy in which a return to a dictatorship would be unthinkable ”

To his credit, the future king started meeting clandestinely with liberal opposition leaders in the years preceding Franco's death. Sworn in as king and head of state two days after Franco died on the 20th November, 1975, King Juan Carlos stated immediately that his aim was to restore democracy and to be king of all Spaniards. At the time this was a bold move, as he was walking a tightrope between powerful, establishment forces and the expectations of much of the country for a modern democracy.

King Juan Carlos initiated limited reforms straight away under an inherited and ineffective prime minister, Carlos Arias Navarro, before replacing him with the more canny Adolfo Suárez in 1976. By 1977 a referendum had been passed by a huge majority introducing universal suffrage and a two-chamber parliamentary ▶



February, 1981



IN FEBRUARY, 1981, the world was shocked to see the Spanish Congress under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero Molina of the Guardia Civil, supported by some 200 armed men. For 18 tense hours, he held the members of Congress hostage, whilst awaiting military back-up to secure the coup. In Valencia, General Jaime Milans del Bosch (Commander of the 3rd Military Region), placed tanks on the streets and called a State of Emergency to offer his support. Meanwhile, General Alfonso Armada, the coup leader, tried desperately to gather troops amongst the rest of the army in order to bolster the uprising.

Behind the scenes, however, King Juan Carlos was strongly voicing his disapproval, a stance that proved critical. The crisis passed with Tejero surrendering and the plotters being quickly arrested. Miraculously, no one had been hurt - but Spanish democracy had felt the white heat of confrontation at a particularly delicate time. It was not to happen again.

◀ system. This was followed the next year by the legalisation of the socialist party (PSOE) and the calling of the first general election for 41 years. The conservative party of Adolfo Suárez won the election and then appointed seven 'wise men' from all the political groups to draft a new constitution.

With the political landscape maturing fast, the new constitution was approved in 1978 and King Juan Carlos relinquished absolute power in favour of a defined parliamentary democracy. Amongst other things, the new constitution forbade a state religion, allowed anyone over 18 to vote and, importantly, started a process of power dissolution to the 17 autonomous

regions. True democracy was now on the starting blocks and a general election with a mandate to govern was called for March, 1979.

Adolfo Suárez retained power with the 1979 election but his conservative party (UCD) was beginning to splinter under the conflicting pressures of deeply entrenched conservative interests and the necessity to continue the momentum of radical social and economic reforms. More dangerous still was the insecurity of the military, whose 36-year-long grip on power under Franco was disappearing fast. Spain's new democracy had yet to be tested by fire, although that was soon to come in 1981, when an attempted military coup was led by General Alfonso Armada.

The coup was quashed largely, however, by the king's disapproval of it. Juan Carlos was subsequently pronounced a hero and granted the overwhelming approval of the nation for his actions, with even the leader of the communists, Santiago Carillo, famously stating: "Today, we are all monarchists". Ironically, the failed coup helped to change the political landscape in totally the opposite way to that intended by hard-line conservatives. When a general election was called in 1982, PSOE secured an overwhelming victory in a powerful and significant rejection of hard-right politics. Indeed, under Felipe González,

the socialist party was to remain in power for 14 consecutive years until 1996, winning four general elections in the process.

Divisive and demoralised, the conservative wing of Spanish politics echoed the experience of the UK Labour Party during the Thatcher years. Several leaders were tried and found wanting and it was not until the conservatives re-invented themselves in 1989 as the Partido Popular (PP) that they found someone capable of restoring their credibility: José María Aznar. However,

“ Spain’s new democracy had yet to be tested by fire, although that was soon to come in 1981, when an attempted military coup was led by General Alfonso Armada ”





General Francisco Franco

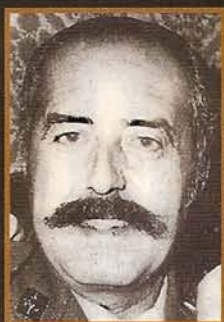
1892-1975

Youngest general (34) in Spain's army 1926

Nationalist leader during the Civil War 1936-1939

Dictator 1939-1975

The symbol of Spanish division



Antonio Tejero Molina

Born 1932

Former Lieutenant-Colonel in the Guardia Civil

Held Congress hostage for 18 hours in abortive, right-wing, military coup

Surrendered and imprisoned for 15 years

Released 1996

Now lives a 'normal life' with his family in Madrid and Málaga



Adolfo Suárez

Born 1932

Appointed prime minister 1976

Led UCD party to victory in Spain's first free elections in 41 years in 1977

Resigned 1981 and retired from active politics 1991

Now suffering from Alzheimer's disease

Remembers nothing of his years as prime minister



Felipe González

Born 1942

Former head of socialist party (PSOE)

Prime Minister 1982-1996

Won 4 elections

Consolidated Spanish parliamentary democracy

Spain's ambassador for the bicentenary celebrations of Latin American independence in 2010



José María Aznar

Born 1953

Former head of conservative party (PP)

Prime Minister 1996-2004

Won 2 elections

Introduced Euro and revitalised economy



Mariano Rajoy Brey

Born 1955

Deputy Prime Minister 2000-2003

Successor to Aznar; surprisingly defeated in the 2004 election

Current head of opposition party (PP)

King Juan Carlos 1

Born 1938

King since 1975

Constitutional monarch and head of the armed forces

Nominated as General Franco's successor but restored parliamentary democracy

Decisively opposed Tejero's 1981 coup attempt

The symbol of Spanish unity

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero

Born 1960

Current head of PSOE

Prime Minister since 2004

Promotes vision of 'Nueva Via' - similar to Tony Blair's 'Third Way'

11M



Three days before the 2004 general election, a tragedy of horrendous proportions hit Spain, with the political aftershocks leading the current PSOE party into power. On the morning of the 11th March, 2004, al-Qaeda terrorists detonated a series of bombs at three train stations in Madrid during rush hour. In the tragedy (now referred to as 11M) 191 people were killed and some 1,800 hurt, with Prime Minister José María Aznar repeatedly - and incorrectly - blaming ETA for the atrocity. As the truth of who was behind the bombing came to light, the PP party lost critical credibility and, with it, their grip on power.

◀ it still took until 1996 before they attained power with the formation of a coalition government.

By the mid 1990s the socialist PSOE party had become damaged by its association with a number of scandals, the most devastating of which was the GAL (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación) murder squads. These were shocking, government approved assassinations against ETA members. Furthermore, like so many long-serving governments, the socialists were considered arrogant and had been implicated in numerous incidences of corruption. Perhaps even more damning was that they were perceived as being incapable of effectively running the economy and revitalising Spain after the recession of the early 1990s.

“ The al-Qaeda bombings that hit Madrid on the 11th March created the conditions for a political upset, resulting in the current PSOE party taking power ”

With the election of the conservative PP party in 1996, Spain showed that it had come of age as a democracy, able to bring back into power a right-wing party without fear of it reverting to the terrifying extremism of the past. In fact, like so much of the democratic world, Spain now effectively has two major competing political parties: the socialists (PSOE) and the conservatives (PP). They roughly mimic the Democrats and Republicans in America or Labour and Conservative in the UK and tend to squabble over politically centrist ground. Neither are radical in any historic sense and both would consider any form of undemocratic government abhorrent.

José María Aznar's conservative party governed quite effectively after 1996, winning an overwhelming mandate in the 2000 elections. However, the ecological disaster of the Prestige oil tanker, support for the Iraq war and the spiralling price of housing diminished their popularity. Nonetheless, they were still expected to win the general elections scheduled for the 14th March, 2004. The al-Qaeda bombings that hit Madrid on the 11th March, however, created the conditions for a political upset, resulting in the current PSOE party taking power.

The next general election is scheduled for 2008, with the eventual result difficult to predict. What is certain, however, is that democracy in Spain is safe - for the first time in its turbulent history. This is a remarkable achievement and a tribute to the Spanish people, who have determinedly put behind them the dreadful divisions of a bitter civil war and a cruel dictatorship, all within the living memory of many. ✕

Spanish Political History TIMELINE

1936-1939

Spanish Civil War (Nationalists against Republicans)

1939-1975

Nationalist dictatorship under General Franco

1955

Spain joins United Nations

1975

Franco dies and Juan Carlos 1 becomes king

1976

Adolfo Suárez appointed prime minister

1977

General election to form a constituent assembly responsible for drafting a new democratic constitution

1978

Spanish Constitution approved; King Juan Carlos gives up absolute power

1979

Conservative (UCD) party wins election and Adolfo Suárez remains prime minister

1981

Tejero mounts unsuccessful right-wing military coup

1982

PSOE wins elections; Felipe González becomes prime minister; Spain joins NATO

1986

PSOE wins elections again; Spain joins the EU

1989

Conservative (PP) party formed; PSOE wins elections again

1993

PSOE loses support in general election and forms coalition government

1996

PP party forms a coalition government; José María Aznar becomes prime minister

2000

PP party wins majority at general election; Aznar remains prime minister

2002

Peseta replaced by Euro

2004

Al-Qaeda bomb Madrid three days before general election; PSOE party gains surprise majority; José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero becomes prime minister

2008

General election scheduled