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2004, A DECISIVE YEAR

25 years of the Constitution - the bedrock of Spanish democracy

Last year Spain celebrated the 25th anniversary of its Constitution, the cornerstone of the democratic system that was implemented after the death of the dictator General Franco in 1975.

Enshrined in its text are guarantees of economic, legal, and social equality - including the right to education, healthcare, and housing - which were fundamental in establishing a new era for Spain.

"The 25th anniversary is an exceptional achievement for a country like Spain, which has never experienced such a long period of institutional and democratic normality as it has in the last quarter of a century," said President José María Aznar to mark the event.

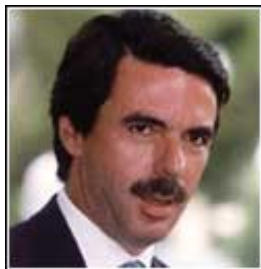
The freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution have transformed the country into a land of opportunity that has become fully integrated into Europe and enjoys a close relationship with the United States.

"Forty years ago, we were an autocratic country and the most closed nation in Western Europe," says Mr. Aznar. "Today Spain is the most open country in the EU and has a more open economy than France, Germany, the UK, or Italy."

This openness has changed other nations' perceptions of Spain, which is determined to carve out a strong global position as an innovator and an important economic power. One of its new roles within the international community is to act as an intermediary between geographically or culturally distant nations.

"Spain is a country you can trust and it projects dynamism and modernity," says Mr. Aznar.

"We facilitate links between the EU and areas in the Mediterranean and Latin America; we also count on a business sector which is conquering new markets and disseminating the new reality of Spain throughout the world."



José María Aznar
President

In addition to enabling Spain to enjoy a new lease of life on the international scene as a product of its democratic liberty, the Constitution changed the domestic political map.

While the document emphasizes the importance of maintaining the "indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation", Article 2 also guarantees the right to self-government for the country's different "nationalities and regions". As a result, between 1978 and 1983, Spain established 17 Autonomous Communities, which have a large degree of political and administrative independence from the central government.

This move came as a reaction to Franco's centralist policy, which had suppressed the recognition of the regions' ethnic and linguistic differences; the devolution of power came to symbolize the new democracy.



The Spanish Constitution of December 1978 laid the foundation for the development of a modern, democratic state.

Each region has the capacity to legislate and manage its own finances, although there are basic universal laws that apply to all the Communities. Since they came into existence, regional governments have renegotiated the extent of their autonomy. While most are now content with their position, Catalonia and the Basque Country continue to challenge the state for more independence.

Perceived ambiguities in the Constitution have made it a source of debate, particularly in the areas concerning the rights of the Autonomous Communities (Regions).

In a sense, this is a continuation of the process which led to the drawing up of the document in 1978; it was drafted by a group of politicians from a variety of parties who were given the daunting task of reaching consensus on how the new Spain should be run.

After Congress and the Senate had approved the Constitution, it was ratified through a public referendum, in which 90 percent were in favor, and was finally sanctioned by the King of Spain on December 27.

While it sets out a list of ideals, Miguel Herrero, one of the founding fathers of the Constitution, believes that it is not simply an utopia, but has led to tangible change.

"The guiding principles have had an important effect and can contribute to reality."

Indeed, they should be the driving force behind the government, believes Virgilio Zapatero, who also drew up the document.

"The Constitution represents an ideal which we have to keep trying to achieve, day after day."

President of Galicia Manuel Fraga Iribarne, also a father of the Constitution, sees it as a unifying and empowering document.

"It has an integrationist philosophy and is not exclusive," he says.

However, Mr. Fraga also believes that the Constitution should be flexible, not set in stone. He is currently seeking reforms including a proposal for the regions to participate in the EU's decision-making bodies.

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