The Resilience of Spanish Democracy

Despite recent turmoil surrounding Catalonia's independence bid, Spain's democracy is stronger than it seems – possibly even more so than in other Western countries

The idea that 'Spain is different' drove generations of romantic travellers across the Pyrenees to see for themselves, their imaginations stirred by visions of vibrant women and charming bandits. But Spain is no longer just the defiant fist on the hip of Bizet's cigar-making Carmen. Despite the attention now focused on the Catalonia region's secession bid , Spain now stands out among Western democracies in a few critical – and positive – ways.

Spain's unique character can be seen in its response to terrorist attacks. In the United Kingdom, the 2005 London bombings resulted in additional legal curbs on individual and group liberties. Likewise, the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States drove a series of changes to surveillance laws that made it easier for the government to spy on ordinary Americans, not to mention the 'Global War on Terror', which continues to wreak havoc in the Middle East.

By contrast, after the 11 March 2004 bombings of Madrid's train system, which left nearly 200 dead, an 'alliance of civilisations' arose in Spain to disarm extremism by building bridges with Islam. This tolerant attitude toward the country's Muslim minority endures to this day, despite another attack in August, on La Rambla, in the heart of Barcelona.

It also seems to be reflected in Spanish politics. While recent elections in virtually all other European countries have featured strong showings by far-right populists – Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) being the latest to make major gains – Spain (and neighbouring Portugal) have remained seemingly immune.

Today, Spain enjoys considerable economic dynamism, with one of the highest growth rates in Europe. But, in recent years, it has suffered economic pain and skyrocketing unemployment, which reached 27 per

cent in 2013. According to conventional wisdom, the combination of economic hardship and immigration is a recipe for Euroskepticism and xenophobia.

Yet neither of the two major political forces that have emerged in Spain in recent years, Ciudadanos and Podemos, has so much as a whiff of right-wing authoritarian tendencies, nor anti-European bombast. Indeed, Ciudadanos is a centrist, business-friendly party; Podemos represents discontented urban middle-class youth with a left-leaning ideological profile. Both are vocally anti-racist and pro-immigrant.

Spain's resilience to far-right populism probably has deep historical roots. The country took shape during the Middle Ages in a dialectical process of interfaith relations, and its integration into the European Union stemmed from an overwhelming consensus on the need to suppress the ghosts of Francisco Franco's dictatorship, following his death in 1975.

Of course, the memory of dictatorship does not always suppress nostalgia for quasi-fascist experiments. Recollections of military rule in the 1970s haven't curbed the rise of the far-right Golden Dawn in Greece; nor has the memory of Admiral Miklos Horthy's quasi-fascist regime in interwar and World War II-era Hungary impeded support for Viktor Orbán's illiberal, xenophobic regime. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Front is the child of the Vichy experiment, and in Germany, the AfD has overcome the legacy of Hitler.

The absence of such political nostalgia in Spain may be explained partly by the fact that a brutal three-year civil war preceded the establishment of Franco's dictatorship in 1939. That experience nurtured a strong pacifist sentiment among the Spanish public, which endures to this day. Some 90 per cent of Spaniards – more than any other Western population – opposed the Iraq War, which their government supported.

Spain's unique resistance to right-wing populist forces may also reflect the nature of Spain's transition to democracy after Franco's death. Conservative groupings, whose origins lay in Francoism, actually served as vital building blocks of Spain's democracy. Some, like the now-ruling People's Party (PP), have over time shifted toward the centre to become more typical conservative European parties, much like the UK's Conservatives or Germany's Christian Democratic Union.

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Crucially, the PP has made this move without losing voters who lean further to the right – the kind of voters who presumably would lead a backlash of right-wing populism. This differs

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sharply from the experience of the 1930s, when moderates' failure to attract a large enough share of the Spanish right fuelled deepening polarisation and, ultimately, civil war.

This is not to say that Spain is a utopia of social unity. On the contrary, the country is now confronted with a major challenge, as domestic forces – in particular, the would-be separatists of Catalonia's autonomous regional government – attempt to dismember the country. Yet the PP has staunchly defended Spanish unity, dismissing Catalonia's independence referendum as unconstitutional and deploying police to stop the vote from taking place (at times in lamentably brutal ways).

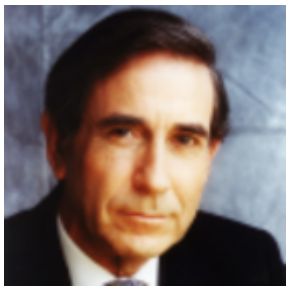
The message is clear: the conflict in Spain is among natives, not against non-natives. And, indeed, though immigrants represent about 10 per cent of Spain's population, immigration is simply not a contentious issue anywhere in the country – perhaps partly because a large share come from Latin America, and thus share cultural and linguistic traits with indigenous Spaniards. The absence of any backlash against the one third of Spain's immigrants who are Romanians and Moroccans probably reflects their low visibility in society.

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Even as other European conservatives have flirted with anti-immigrant posturing in an attempt to stave off populist threats, Spain's PP has done no such thing. Meanwhile, its European credentials are strong. In a country where, according to an Elcano/Demos study, only 10 per cent of the population would want to leave the EU – compared with 22 per cent in France and 45 per cent in the UK – this is unlikely to change.

For Europeans, Spain now represents a different kind of fantasy than in days past. It demonstrates that, even as a country's ethnic composition changes, as it faces terrorist attacks and a deep recession, it can resist the siren song of extremism.

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