5 After Franco, What?

Shortly before his investiture Juan Carlos told a foreign journalist that his overriding goal was ‘the restoration of real democracy’, by which he understood the establishment of a Western-style parliamentary monarchy. The king’s reasons for advocating such a system of government were at once simple and complex. The period since Carrero Blanco’s assassination had given him a realistic foretaste of what was in store for him as king of a Francoist monarchy and it was a prospect he did not relish. Although the situation after Franco’s death was different in that he had inherited some of his powers, Juan Carlos could still be held hostage by the government, the Cortes and the Council of the Realm, institutions over which he had relatively little control. His first goal was therefore to become genuinely independent of the executive and legislative institutions of the country, something that could only be achieved in the context of a fully democratic parliamentary monarchy.1

Additionally, Juan Carlos had become increasingly aware of the growing demand for democratic change emanating from broad sectors of Spanish society. This was something he readily perceived in his tours of the country and in his countless interviews with Spaniards of all kinds, as well as from the increasingly outspoken press. Furthermore his frequent visits abroad and his contact with foreign statesmen had led him to conclude that, socio-economically, Spain was a country not unlike its Western European neighbours and was therefore capable of sustaining a democratic system of government.

Juan Carlos also advocated a democratic solution for Spain because it was the natural option for a country already highly integrated in the Western sphere of influence. Thus in October 1975 Borchgrave found him ‘eager to join the ranks of the Western alliance and to link Spain’s efforts with Western Europe’s democracies in what he views as the most important endeavour of the age – the unification of the European continent’. Later, in his proclamation speech to the Cortes, Juan Carlos emphasised that ‘we Spaniards are Europeans’, adding that ‘Europe must take Spain into account’. Given the EC’s refusal to have authoritarian regimes in its midst, this amounted to an endorsement of sweeping political change.

At this stage the king did not have a blueprint for democratisation, though he was determined to ‘act legally and constitutionally under all and any circumstances’, as Fernández-Miranda had always advised him. Juan Carlos believed it was the government that should take the political

C. Powell, Juan Carlos of Spain
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initiative, without involving him unnecessarily in its decisions; at most he would ‘counsel it and orient its thrust and its action’. In keeping with this aim, he would abstain from presiding cabinet meetings except on special occasions.2

The king’s immediate concern was to secure Fernández-Miranda’s appointment as president of the Cortes and the Council of the Realm. This was essential, as these two bodies would determine the government’s legislative activity and the selection of a future premier respectively. His former tutor’s appointment was by no means a foregone conclusion, however, not least because the out-going president, Valcárcel, who enjoyed the full support of the Council, intended to stand for reelection. On 27 November Juan Carlos duly convinced Valcárcel to withdraw his candidature by insinuating the offer of a ministerial post in the new government.

The following day the king sought Arias’s support in winning over the more recalcitrant members of the Council of the Realm. Arias, who had assumed the king would attempt to remove him, read this as evidence of his own confirmation and immediately offered his enthusiastic collaboration. With the Saharan crisis and his own investiture behind him, however, Juan Carlos was in a considerably stronger position than before, and he intentionally delayed Arias’s ratification, thereby linking his continuity in office to Fernández-Miranda’s appointment. Leaving nothing to chance, Juan Carlos also canvassed several councillors himself, amongst them Antonio Oriol, one of the Franco regime’s most influential figures, and two of its younger members, Primo de Rivera and Enrique de la Mata.3

After an extremely tense session, the longest in its history, on 1 December 1975 the Council of the Realm finally presented the king with a terna (or list of three candidates), from which he immediately selected Fernández-Miranda. Two days later, at his swearing-in ceremony, the Machiavellian professor declared, largely for the benefit of Juan Carlos, that ‘I feel absolutely responsible for my entire past. I am loyal to it, but it does not tie me down’.4

Although the Council of the Realm had obeyed the king’s wishes on the understanding that Arias would remain in office, Juan Carlos was sorely tempted to appoint his own prime minister after all. In November he had briefly considered the candidature of López de Letona, a former minister of industry and distinguished technocrat, in what came to be known as the ‘Lolita operation’. The latter, however, appeared to be masterminded by Fernández-Miranda’s rivals, and was stillborn.5 The king also entertained the possibility of appointing another former minister, Castiella, who had been summarily dismissed by Carrero Blanco in 1969 after dominating Spanish foreign policy for over a decade.