

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 10TH March 2015

By Kevin Bruton



It would be wonderful to be able to start this Update by announcing 'Countless Corruption Cases Clog Spanish Courts'. As always, however, reality is very different and, while there is no space for an Update on all the corruption cases ongoing in Spain, the longest running in recent history is due to come to court within the foreseeable future. This is the Gürtel case, ie the illegal financing on a massive scale (probably running into billions of euros) of Spain's most successful political party, the right-wing Partido Popular, or PP, in overall power in central government since 2011 and in control of most regional parliaments. The "juez", or examining magistrate, Pablo Ruz, after five years of investigation, will bring to court forty leading "empresarios" or business leaders and senior politicians from PP. The charges relate only to the first tranche of Gürtel from 1999 to 2005. The total bail set will be 449 million euros and the names include the infamous whistle-blowing ex-treasurer of PP, Luis Bárcenas, two previous Treasurers, former PP mayors and a former cabinet minister.

Spain's equivalent of the Crown Prosecution Service is asking for a jail sentence of 42 years and 5 months for Bárcenas and for the so-called leader of Gürtel, the entrepreneur, Francisco Correa, 125 years and one month. The bad news in all this is that those charged are unlikely to appear in the dock until after the General Election in November this year. Another crucial point, without seeking to denigrate individual examining magistrates, is the extent to which one can trust the justice system in Spain. It is widely perceived to be slow and inefficient but is it corrupt as well? In the past month, for instance, in the PP-controlled Madrid Region, the opposition has discovered that PP have been, through a private intermediary company, paying extra 'expenses' (for want of a better word) to examining magistrates who are investigating cases of corruption in . . . PP!

This year is, of course, a major election year in Spain with local elections nationwide on 24th May, as well as Regional Parliamentary Elections in 13 of Spain's 17 Regions. In addition, an early election has been called in Cataluña for 27th September while, the biggest of them all, the General Election, is due to take place in November. Firstly, however, there is the small matter of Regional Elections in Spain's biggest region, Andalucía, on 22nd March, a subject to which this Update will return.

It is worthwhile, however, to provide a summary of the State of the Nation Debate in the Spanish Parliament which took place over two days – 24th and 25th February. This annual event was the first opportunity for the new leader of Spain's opposition Socialist Party, or PSOE, Pedro Sánchez, only elected in July of last year, to take on Mariano Rajoy, the PP Prime Minister. And the new boy bested the grizzled veteran! Sánchez not only out-debated Rajoy, he unsettled him totally by accusing him of corruption, of destroying Bárcenas' computers and of being totally unworthy of his office.

Rajoy argued that PP has lifted Spain's economy out of recession and saved Spain from leaving the euro and stated that Spanish households are already feeling the benefits. Sánchez countered: "Which Spaniards are you referring to? Which bars do you frequent? You do not speak with the unemployed, with young people who have emigrated, with families evicted from their homes. Walk the streets, Señor Rajoy! Your leadership of the government has been a huge fraud with widescale destruction". When Sánchez claimed that he personally was free of corruption – "I am a clean politician. I am!" Rajoy lost his rag completely and shouted "Don't come back here and say anything. You are pathetic!"

Various opinion polls on who won the debate gave it to Sánchez, some narrowly, but others, such as La Sexta Noticias, significantly, with 28% saying Sánchez won and 18% siding with Rajoy. Importantly, a majority did not know or care and this impression was further reinforced by images passed rapidly around the social media which showed the PP deputy speaker, Celia Villalobos, while supposedly chairing the debate, busy on her tablet lining up fruits and vegetables in neat rows in a popular computer game!

The first electoral test this year is in Andalucía on 22nd March. There are 109 seats in the Regional Parliament, until recently run by a coalition of PSOE and Izquierda Unida, the communists. Clearly, 55 seats are necessary to secure an overall majority. The latest CIS poll gives PSOE 44 seats (down 3 from the last elections in 2012), PP 34 (down 16) and, in their first real domestic national test, Podemos on 21/22. The communists are on 4/5 seats (down 12) and a new force on the national scene, Ciudadanos (Citizens) is predicted to win 5 seats.

The Andalucía election result is crucially important not just for Andalucía but because it will or may show that the two-party system which has predominated in the 40 years since Franco died, i.e. PSOE and PP, is irretrievably broken. The anti-establishment party, Podemos, is now well known internationally but Ciudadanos is a right-wing party which is a national version of a young Catalan party, Ciutadans, established within the last decade by Albert Rivera, another young politician who is anti-independence for Cataluña and has now managed, after years of a strong media presence, to establish the party nationally. His party, frankly, is old-style neo-liberal but will take votes from disaffected PP voters on the right just as Podemos will take votes from disenchanting PSOE voters on the left.

The last few weeks have seen party lists being drawn up for the 24th May local and regional elections. PP still has not finished the process in most cases, especial with Rajoy exerting a Caesar-like control over who will be top of PP lists in the Regional Parliamentary Elections. Deciding on the candidates for the Madrid Region in particular has become a veritable “House of Cards”. The PP head of the Madrid Region since September 2012 has been Ignacio González, previously deputy to PP’s self-styled ‘Margaret Thatcher’, Esperanza Aguirre, who stood down for health reasons.

There have been rumours for years that Ignacio González bought a luxury 1.5 million euro duplex apartment on a golf resort in Estepona on the Costa del Sol with dirty money emanating from Gürtel. On 2nd March, “El Mundo” newspaper reported that, on 29th November 2011, Ignacio González called a meeting with two senior police commissioners in a café-bar near the Puerta del Sol in Madrid. According to “El Mundo”, González wanted to cover up the purchase of the duplex carried out by an off-shore company. Later that day, 2nd March, González called a press conference and said that the two police commissioners, whom he named, had requested the meeting and tried to blackmail him about the duplex. Finally, on 9th March, “El Mundo” published transcripts of a recording of the conversation in the café-bar between the two police commissioners and González. Not only is there no suggestion of blackmail – in fact the contrary; González called on them to stop the police investigation and said “Yo quiero evitar que esto salga” or “I want to prevent this coming out into the open”. González also referred in the recorded conversation to the “mafia that surrounds Rajoy”; so now “The Sopranos” meets “House of Cards”!

PP is also in turmoil in the City of Madrid since Rajoy has not only NOT nominated González to continue in the Region but he has nominated the previous regional head to stand as Mayor. Aguirre is embroiled in internecine warfare within her own party at present and also, by association with people close to her in PP facing corruption charges, is, in the eyes of many Madrileños, unfit to occupy the position of Mayor of the capital city.

It remains to be seen how this plays out but, importantly, also, everyone is thinking about possible alliances/coalitions following Spain’s General Election in November. The latest poll on national voting intentions came out on 8th March. In the Metroscopia poll in “El País” newspaper, people were asked how

they would vote if there were a General Election today. Incredibly, the results give a technical draw between four parties, with Podemos at 22.5%, PSOE at 20.02%, PP at 18.6% and Ciudadanos at 18.4%.

Sunday, 8th March was also, of course, International Women's Day or "Día Internacional de la Mujer". There were, of course, demonstrations and marches across the world and in Spain where Pedro Sánchez, the PSOE leader, led a huge march in Madrid. A Eurostat report published on 5th March showed that, in 2013, women earned 16.4% less per hour worked than men in the European Union. Although this figure has improved slightly in most European countries, in Spain the gender pay-gap has widened, from 16.1% less in 2008 to 19.3% less in 2013.

It would be better, however, in lieu of statistics, to leave the last word on the significance of International Women's Day in Spain to one of Spain's leading novelists, Almudena Grandes, a woman brought up in the post-Franco transition. The present writer feels certain she will not object to a brief paraphrase of her words in "El País" newspaper. She wrote:

"While the mothers of European women of our age [she is in her 50s/60s] were fighting for equality, our mothers were living subject to a nineteenth century Penal Code. While women elsewhere were burning their bras, our mothers were legally incapacitated from doing anything other than marrying and having children. WE had to manage in one bound what others had done over many years and without a compass, improvising everything. We learnt to renounce being as perfect as our mothers so as not to go mad; we learnt to absolve ourselves for letting others look after our children while we travelled for work; we learnt to defreeze a pizza for dinner without feeling guilty. But this was our only failure. We never managed not to feel guilty but we did everything else, we did it alone and we did it well.

I look back and still do not understand where we found such imagination, such energy and such will-power but I am very proud of Spanish women of my generation. History books will not talk about us but progress in this country would not have been possible without us, the Spanish women in our fifties and sixties. Happy 8th March, girls! We deserve it more than anyone."