

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 13TH JANUARY 2015

By Kevin Bruton



The news in Spain, as everywhere else, has been dominated by the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris. The Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, joined other world leaders in Paris on 11th January, as did the leader of Spain's opposition Socialist party, Pedro Sánchez. There were demonstrations of 'solidarité' in all Spain's major cities. In Madrid, 50 Islamic associations read out a statement expressing their "total condemnation of the killings" which they said were "completely contrary to the civic and human values of our Islamic beliefs. Spain raised its terrorist alert level immediately following the "Charlie Hebdo" attack. It is now effectively on point seven on an eight-point scale.

The government ordered increased security at airports, railway and coach/bus stations, at electrical and nuclear plants and at other sensitive installations. It is interesting that before the Paris attacks there were, in Spain, 3,000 members of the security forces allocated to counter-terrorism. This is twenty times greater than the 150 employed in the same task eleven years ago, prior to 11th March 2004 when train bombs in Madrid killed 192 people.

Inevitably, the PP government is proposing tougher anti-terrorism legislation and, at the moment of writing, these measures are being discussed with the Socialist opposition. Some of the measures advocated go too far in the opinion of Socialist leader Pedro Sánchez, for instance the suggestion that everyone flying into and out of Spain will have his or her name entered into a microfiche. Cartoonists and illustrators around the globe have, of course, responded creatively to the Charlie Hebdo events. The front page of the next edition of the "New Yorker" magazine, due out on 19th January, will carry on its front cover an illustration by a Spanish woman cartoonist, Ana Juan, from Valencia. The cartoon shows the Eiffel Tower tapering into a pencil.

As always, the change of year produces year-end and year-start statements from political leaders. Spain's new Head of State, King Felipe VI, made his first televised Christmas speech to the nation on the evening of 24th December. In the broadcast, Felipe highlighted three areas – corruption, the economy and Cataluña. He said, firstly, that the fight against corruption must be an "objetivo irrenunciable" or "an objective that cannot be renounced". Secondly, he expressed grave concern at the economic situation; while acknowledging signs of growth he also deplored the level of unemployment in Spain which, he said, was unacceptable and needs prioritising. Then, in an obvious reference to Cataluña, he called for all people to respect the Constitution and to respect one another's personality, culture, traditions, languages and institutions. He finished by wishing everyone a Happy Christmas in Spain's four official languages – Spanish, euskera (Basque), Catalán, and gallego (Galician).

Felipe's speech was praised by PP and PSOE but not by nationalist parties or by Izquierda Unida (the Communists) whose leader called it "decepcionante" or "disappointing". Podemos said that the King had successfully diagnosed Spain's problems but offered no solutions. 8.2 million watched the King's speech, 1.5 million more than in 2013 with Juan Carlos. These 8.2 million represent 400,000 more than the combined BBC and ITV audience in the UK, 7.8 million, who watched the Queen on Christmas Day (the most watched programme of the day). The PM Rajoy and PSOE's Pedro Sánchez closed the Parliamentary year on 18th December with mutual summaries of the year accompanied by mutual verbal attacks. Sánchez accused Rajoy of pursuing extreme right-wing policies in government while Rajoy talked up macro-economic figures which suggest a two percent rise in GDP in 2015. Sánchez also wrote an article in "El País" on 31st December 2014 entitled "Un balance mirando al futuro" or "A summary looking towards the future". He lambasted austerity measures as nothing other than "The politics of selfishness and inequality". He said that the Socialists want to reconstruct the welfare state and overturn unjust inequalities in society. Naturally, Sánchez is thinking of 2015 as a huge election year. On 24th May there are local and regional elections across Spain with regional governments being elected in 13 of Spain's 17 regions. An early regional election may also be called in Cataluña, while in November there will be a general election.

Sánchez has been emphasising the need for unity around his leadership. He faces primary elections in June/July to decide who will be the prime ministerial candidate to face Rajoy in the November General Election. Rajoy's premiership, which has taken passivity to a new extreme, will, this year, turn inactivity into inaction. Unbelievably, PP announced before Christmas that no new legislation will be introduced this year, ie virtually a year before the General Election. With opinion polls variously giving the lead to PSOE or Podemos with PP not far behind, speculation about pacts or alliances following the General Election are already rife. PSOE will never ally with PP to form a grand coalition, as in Germany. Podemos will not ally with either main party and nor will PP with any major party. It will, therefore be an interesting election year!

All parties have been and are choosing candidates for the May local and regional elections. Currently, Podemos are looking towards Greece for an electoral lift. On 25th January, a General Election takes place in Greece and, riding high in Greek opinion polls is the anti-establishment party, Syriza, under their leader Alexis Tsipras. Podemos and Syriza are very close as are their two leaders, Pablo Iglesias and Tsipras. Iglesias said about the possible triumph of Syriza in the Greek election that "Democracy is imposing itself on fear" and "The elites and their parties are trembling". Pablo Echenique, one of Podemos' five Euro MPs, said in "El Mundo" on 31st December that "Spain's first elections of 2015 are in Greece". Iglesias and Tsipras featured on the front cover of the French daily newspaper "Libération" in the first week of January under the heading of "Le printemps de la gauche rouge" or "The Spring of the red left". Iglesias, however, is targeting the General Election in November. Andalucía and Cataluña are the two regions with the greatest number of seats in the national parliament. Andalucía elects 60 MPs, which is why Iglesias is planning a major rally there this month. Cataluña elects 47 MPs and Iglesias addressed 17,000 people in Barcelona on 21st December. He has antagonised nationalists there and in the Basque Country. In both places Podemos is threatening traditional nationalist hegemony.

The Socialist party in the Madrid Region, lead by Tomás Gómez, has effectively joined with Podemos in leading the campaign by Hepatitis C sufferers against government policy. Since before Christmas, Hepatitis C protesters have been locked in at the Hospital Doce de Octubre in Madrid. There are 480,000 hepatitis sufferers in Spain, but the 35,000 in a grave condition are unable to afford the new drugs which can cost between 45,000€ and 50,000€ for a course of treatment. (In Egypt, for example, the treatment costs 900€.) The Madrid Socialist Party has issued a lawsuit against central and regional government while protests continue. On 10th January, there was a human chain of demonstrators in Madrid while, on 21st January, campaigners will travel en masse to the European Parliament.

With regard to the economy, unemployment fell overall in 2014, with 417,574 fewer people on the official unemployment register. However, of all the new jobs created, only 8% were permanent and the poverty and humiliation of low-paid/part-time/temporary employment or zero-hours contracts continues in Spain as elsewhere. Thomas Piketty, the French author of the best-selling "Capital in the 21st Century" was in Madrid recently to promote his book. He gave numerous media interviews and appeared in public with both Pedro Sánchez of PSOE and Pablo Iglesias of Podemos. He said in an interview in "El Mundo" on 9th January that it is a mistake to think that the worst of the crisis is over. In Spain, and in Europe, he advocated an end to austerity measures and immediate investment in growth. In Greece and in Spain he was encouraged by the growth of left-wing parties which, despite disagreements with the European Union, are essentially pro-European and he condemned ultra-nationalist parties such as Marine Le Pen's party in France.

With reference to on-going corruption cases in Spain, it now seems certain that Cristina, sister of the King, will face charges in court but the date has not yet been fixed. The Pujol case continues but Jordi Pujol's statement that his immense fortune (which some estimate to be 600 million euros) was inherited from his father has been disproved by the recent revelation of his father's will and testament in which he was left the equivalent of 78,000€! Two recent reports on corruption reveal, respectively, the failings of the justice system and the ease with which one can falsify information in Spain. On 26th December, José Luís Núñez and his son were released from prison after serving 38 days. They had been sentenced in 2014 to 2 years

and two months in prison for corruption. But, it had taken 17 years for their case to be completed in court! Their release provoked a demonstration by fellow prisoners.

A major art gallery in the city of Valencia is the gallery of Modern art known as the IVAM. On 4th April last year, the Vice -President of the Valencia region announced that, in 2013, the IVAM was the sixth most visited modern art gallery in the world with 1,163,419 visitors. There was general scepticism and, in December, the truth came out. In 2013, the IVAM had 85,070 visitors, not 1.2 million! Also, the figures had been falsified and aggrandised in previous years. Thus, the 1.15 million visitors claimed for 2012 turned out to be 98,176.

Finally, but not frivolously, the Film Awards season is upon us and several famous actors have died in the past few weeks such as Rod Taylor and Anita Ekberg. What saddened the present writer, however, was the death of the actress Luise Rainer, at 104 years of age. Luise Rainer won two Oscars in 1937 and 1938, having fled Germany with the advent of Hitler. She was a militant anti-fascist and a dynamic defender of Spain's Second Republic during the Civil War. She raised funds in Hollywood for the Republican cause and she funded a castle in France which sheltered 10,000 Republican children. She also part-financed the Dutch communist Joris Ivens' pro-Republic propaganda film "The Spanish Earth", a film on which worked Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos and Lillian Hellman. Hellman said that, "Rainer without any doubt did more for the Republic in the US than anyone else".

As a result, mention of Rainer's name was banned in Franco's Spain. In 1986, eleven years after Franco's death and fifty years after the start of the Civil War, the San Sebastián Film Festival paid her special homage. When she went to San Sebastián, they put her up in the sumptuous Palacio de Ayete. When she found out that Franco used to spend his summer holidays there, she booked herself into a modest hotel in the town! RIP Luise Rainer.