

McLennan Community College

An Analysis of the Spanish Crown

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April 16, 2021

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Words such as “King,” “Queen,” and “Princess” can sound archaic to the general American audience. Nevertheless, many European countries’ form of government is a parliamentary monarchy,¹ Spain being one of them. This establishment is so much ingrained in Spain’s history and mentality that it is necessary to comprehend the monarchy’s function in order to understand today’s Spanish society. This essay analyzes the role of the monarchical institution from its foundation until today, providing insights into the future of the Spanish Crown.

History of the monarchy:

At the end of the 15th-century, Isabella I and Ferdinand II, the Catholic Monarchs, unified the two biggest’s dynasties in Spain through their marriage, considered the genesis of Spain as a nation.² They belonged to the dynasty of Trastámara, whose efforts focused on the exploration and colonization of America and the preservation of Catholicism.³ Their rule served as Spain’s starting point to become one of the world’s most significant powers of that era.

The daughter of the Catholic Monarchs, the infamous Joanna “the Mad,” was next in line for the throne but could not rule by herself because of her mental condition. After her death at the beginning of the 16th-century, Charles I, Joanna’s son, became King. He belonged to the House

¹ “A political system where the function of head of state is vested in a hereditary or elected monarch while a government accountable to the elected Parliament exercises the bulk of the executive powers, determines national policies and oversees their implementation” (Parliamentary Monarchy).

² For the majority of this section, most information came from (Wheeler; Griffiths; Altamira and Chapman; Short History).

³ The fight for the preservation of Catholicism led to the expulsion of Jews in 1492, after the conquest of Granada, and to the creation of the Inquisition.

of Habsburg, which had similar interests to the previous dynasty.⁴ Charles II, the last monarch of the Habsburg Dynasty, was unable to produce offspring. At the end of Charles II's reign, he appointed Philip V, his sister's grandson, to become King. Philip's brother challenged his decision, and the War of Succession started, which concluded with the victory of Philip in 1714. He belonged to the House of Bourbon, leading a centralist regime focused on monarchical reinstatement, naturally influenced by the French's political and cultural system.⁵

At the end of the 17th-century, Napoleon Bonaparte asked the King of Spain, Ferdinand VII, to let his army cross Spain in order to attack Portugal. Ferdinand agreed, both because of his fear of French military power and his old enmity with Portugal. Napoleon did cross Spain but, despite his promises, never withdrew troops from Spanish territory. Years of French occupation led to mutual distrust between Napoleon and Ferdinand VII, eventually leading to French military actions against Spain, forcing Ferdinand to abdicate. In his place, Napoleon proclaimed his brother, Joseph I, to be the King of Spain. This decision led to the Peninsular War of 1808. As a result, Joseph I abdicated in 1813, and Ferdinand VII got his throne back, returning power to the Bourbons.

Tensions during the continuation of the Bourbon dynasty were building up. In 1833, the Carlist Wars broke out between supporters of Prince Charles and of Isabella II.⁶ As a result, Isabella rose to power in 1843, instituting a more liberal government. However, she lost popularity quickly due to numerous scandals and was eventually exiled to France. After two

⁴ The Habsburg dynasty focused on territorial expansion in America and Europe, on expelling the Moorish from Spain, and on fighting the growing protestant movements.

⁵ In the 18th-century, monarchs had to take into account the liberal French ideas that were propagating all over Europe.

⁶ The Salic Law, which prevented women from reigning, was overturned.

years without a monarch, Amadeo I, a member of the House of Savoy, was elected by the Spanish Congress in 1871. He abdicated two years later, wisely stating that Spain was impossible to govern.⁷ His resignation led to the First Spanish Republic, which lasted only one year. In 1874, the republican government collapsed, and a partial parliamentary monarchy was reinstated.

The House of Bourbon, now represented by Alfonso XII, was in power again. The dynasty focused on restoring traditional Bourbon ideas while taking into account the liberal movement growing in Spain. To avert the danger of another republic, one of the most significant changes in the Spanish monarchy was introduced: the King's role changed from reigning to solely governing. Throughout the rule of the dynasty, conflicts arose nationwide.⁸ At the end of the 19th-century, the Disaster of 98, also known as the Spanish-American War, occurred, where Spain lost control of its last colonies.⁹ Alfonso XIII, Alfonso XII's son, became King after his father's death. The Crown's popularity was at an all-time low. During Alfonso XIII's mandate, a plebiscite was held to decide if Spain should become a republic,¹⁰ which most Spaniards voted for. Alfonso XIII left Spain, and the Second Spanish Republic was established in 1931.

Growing tensions between nationalists and republicans led to the Spanish Civil War of 1936, eventually won in 1939 by the Nationalists, led by Francisco Franco.¹¹ Being a big admirer of Hitler and Mussolini led him to enforce the "Spanish State," de facto a dictatorship. After the

⁷ Amadeo I was proposed by General Prim, a respected army general. When General Prim died, Amadeo lost all of his support.

⁸ The most notable conflict being a coup d'etat led by Miguel Primo de Rivera, who instated totalitarianism for a short period of time. Throughout the dictatorship, the roles of Alfonso XII were still present, but distorted.

⁹ Among the territories lost by Spain were Cuba, Philippines, and Puerto Rico.

¹⁰ Spaniards started to doubt the role of the Monarch because of how Alfonso XII handled Primo de Rivera's dictatorship.

¹¹ Franco was a military coup plotter with strong traditional, monarchical, and catholic convictions.

decline of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, Franco tried to distance himself from these regimes reducing the usual violence against his population while maintaining authoritarian control over Spain, which lasted until his death. Throughout his life, Franco personally trained and mentored Juan Carlos I, the next in line of the Bourbon dynasty, to continue Franco's legacy and govern Spain as a totalitarian state. After Franco's death in 1975, Juan Carlos I chose not to follow the dictator's commands and decided that the country deserved and needed a parliamentary monarchy. This period is known as the "Transition," where Spain slowly moved away from an absolutist state to a parliamentary monarchy that valued freedom as much as democracy. The current constitution, written by delegates of leading political parties, was ratified in 1978, where 87.78 percent¹² of Spaniards voted in favor (Constitución).

Since the ratification of the Constitution, the monarch's role has been especially crucial for the integrity of Spain on two occasions: advocating and providing support throughout the Transition era and the disbandment of the coup d'état led by Antonio Tejero¹³ on February 23, 1981. Juan Carlos' actions increased his popularity since he was seen as a savior of the Spanish democracy. In 2014, he abdicated (formally, due to health issues, but in practice, due to a growing amount of scandals), conceding the throne to his son—and the current King of Spain—Felipe VI.

¹² 58.97 percent of the electoral census (Constitución).

¹³ Tejero was a lieutenant Colonel who wanted to impose another dictatorship. For further information refer to (Bolaños).

Powers given by the Constitution:

The 1978 Constitution, consisting of a preamble and ten main sections (or Titles), serves as the backbone of the Spanish nation. Even though the King's responsibilities are developed gradually in almost every segment, Title II perfectly summarizes the Crown's everyday roles and duties:

“The King is the Head of State, the symbol of its unity and permanence. He arbitrates and moderates the regular functioning of the institutions, assumes the highest representation of the Spanish State in international relations, especially with those nations belonging to the same historic community, and exercises the functions expressly conferred on him by the Constitution and the law” (The Spanish Constitution, Art. 56, Sec. 1).

Additionally, Article 62 specifies the functions of the King, who can veto and promulgate laws, call and dissolve congress, call elections and referendums, propose a candidate for the presidency, appoint and dismiss members of the government, be informed of affairs of State, and command the Army (The Spanish Constitution, Art. 62).

Besides what is formally written in the Constitution, the actual domains of influence of Spain's current monarch, Felipe VI, can be divided into three categories: social, economic, and political.

Social Analysis:

The King's social role is symbolic. As stated in the Constitution, the monarch is the Head of State, representing Spain and its citizens. Nevertheless, not every Spaniard supports the Crown.

Conservatives tend to defend this institution, some for religious reasons, since they view the King as sacred and divine, while others respect traditional Spanish institutions, perceiving

change as unneeded. On the other end of the spectrum, more liberal minds call for a change in the system of government, advocating for the dismantling of the monarchical institutions and establishing the Third Republic. The main arguments are that the monarchy is undemocratic, archaic, costly, and unnecessary. Nevertheless, most Spaniards fall into a middle ground, not getting involved at all in these debates, in part because the monarch is of no relevance to them. Overall, the social role is the most important of all, even though it has been diminished due to recent scandals, such as illegal negotiations with Saudi Arabia or opaque accounts in Swiss banks (Rodriguez). General distrust led to an increase of the republican movement.

Financial aspects of the monarchy:

Analyzing the monarch's economic impact is complicated because many factors are involved in the Spanish economy. Determining the percentage of the Spanish budget attributed to the King's influence is almost impossible. What can be analyzed is how much the monarchical institution costs.

The Constitution states that "the King receives an overall amount from the State Budget for the upkeep of his Family and Household," decided every year (The Spanish Constitution, Art. 65). Since 2018, the budget for the Royal Family and Household has been 7,887,150 euros. In 2021, this budget was raised to 8,431,150 euros, which corresponds to approximately ten million American dollars. The 2021 annual salary of Felipe VI was 253,850 euros, and Letizia Ortiz's, the Queen of Spain, 139,610 euros¹⁴ (Ejercicio 2021). Compared to the other European monarchies, the Spanish institution is not costly. The British Crown is the most expensive, with a

¹⁴ These numbers do not take into account any personal business that the King or his family might have, which sometimes gave them substantial bonuses.

total Sovereignty Grant for 2019-2020 amounted to 82.4 million pounds¹⁵ (Goodey). It is followed by Monaco, the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, Denmark, and Luxembourg, all ahead of Spain (Kottasová, Ivana, and Khaliq). A comparison between the Spanish economy, with a predicted budget of 655 million dollars for 2021 and a nominal GDP of 1450.88 billion dollars (España), and the cost of the monarchical institution shows that the economic cost of the monarchy is almost insignificant.¹⁶

Political Context:

The King's political role is impartial.¹⁷ As Felipe VI said in 2014, "the independence of the Crown, its political neutrality, and its wish to embrace and reconcile the different ideological standpoints enables it to contribute to the stability of our political system" (Casa Real). Nevertheless, politicians do have an opinion on the King's role. As discussed previously, Spain is divided between conservatives who want to preserve the monarchy, liberals who want to get rid of it, and moderates who do not think that a change is necessary. PP¹⁸ and VOX consolidate the right-wing parties in Spain, calling for the preservation of the monarchical institution. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Podemos¹⁹ calls for the progressive dismantling of the monarchy

¹⁵ Approximately 113 million dollars.

¹⁶ The cost of the monarchical institution makes up less than two percent of Spain's national budget and an even smaller percentage of the GDP.

¹⁷ Naturally, the current King leans more towards political groups that do not want to get rid of the monarchical institution.

¹⁸ "Partido Popular," which translates to the People's Party.

¹⁹ Translates to United We Can.

and installation of a republic. Ciudadanos²⁰ and PSOE²¹ fall into a middle ground regarding the monarchical topic since there is no direct call to action to preserve or attack the institution.

The current prime minister is Pedro Sanchez, secretary-general of PSOE, ruling in coalition with Podemos. If Podemos had a more significant role in the Government, motions to change or eliminate the monarchical establishment would be brought to the Cortes Generales.²² Since this is a possibility that cannot be ruled out, it is convenient to analyze the process to change the current governmental system, as described in the 1978 Constitution.

Steps towards change:

There are only two ways to get rid of the monarchy in Spain: amending the Constitution or writing a new one. Historically, similar structural changes have come with a significant event or crisis that demanded a new body of law, since getting rid of the Crown would also mean rewriting most of the 1978 Constitution.²³ Nevertheless, the current Constitution could be wholly amended following the diplomatic terms for Essential reforms²⁴ developed in Article 168.

Firstly, the amendments must be approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of each House, and the Cortes Generales²⁵ shall immediately be dissolved. Then, the Houses elected must examine the text of the new Constitution and ratify the decision, which must again be

²⁰ Translates to Citizens.

²¹ “Partido Socialista Obrero Español,” which translates to the Spanish Socialist Worker’s Party.

²² Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Podemos, has advocated for reforms regarding the Crown’s powers and demanded a referendum to decide Spain’s governmental system (Phillips).

²³ The role of the King is named in almost every title and section of the Constitution.

²⁴ An Essential Reform is a total revision of the Constitution or a partial revision of the Preliminary Title, Chapter Two, Section 1 of Title I, or Title II, which is the Crown (The Spanish Constitution, Art.168, Sec. 1).

²⁵ The Spanish Parliament.

approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of both Houses. Lastly, once the Cortes Generales have passed the amendment, it shall be ratified by popular vote²⁶ (The Spanish Constitution, Art. 168).

Insights:

After analyzing the Crown's role and the current situation of Spain, the million-dollar question arises: is a republic possible? The answer is yes, but not at the moment.

Even though the republican movement in Spain is growing every day, it is still not sufficiently powerful. A study held in 2020 showed that 40.9 percent of people preferred a republic over 34.9 percent who preferred a monarchy (Plataforma). However, these numbers are not significant enough to convince two-thirds of each House twice. On the other hand, a republic is seen as a bad idea among a substantial portion of the Spanish population who still profess loyalty and support to the historical figure of Francisco Franco and his regime, who focused his last years on the economic recovery of Spain. As the common saying goes, the winners write the history, and propaganda against the Third Republic has been present since 1939. Additionally, the steps to change the structure of Spain are long and complicated since the Constitution protects traditional Spanish institutions and the governmental system. The most democratic way for Spain to become a republic is via Article 168 since a significant constitutional crisis does not seem imminent.

²⁶ As stated in Article 92.1, issues of extreme importance need to be submitted for referendum (The Spanish Constitution, Art. 92, Sec. 1). The terms of referendums are dictated by organic laws, which are implemented for the better execution of the Constitution (Organic Law).

However, even though The Spanish Crown is not necessary for the functioning of the State, the roles granted to this institution are. Spain could prosper without a monarch, and the consequences of the establishment of the Third Republic would not be enormous: the powers that resided in the King would be granted to some other institution or figure. Transitioning to a republic would not be too costly either, since the money used to preserve the monarchical institution could be directed towards adapting the new governmental structures.

Nevertheless, the activism that focuses on getting rid of the King is pointing in the wrong direction. The arguments used are mostly valid, but the way they are delivered is incorrect. For an actual change to happen, there is a need to convince, not attack, the defendants of the monarchy. The current approach has been politicized, polarizing the Spanish political spectrum even more. Liberals need to take a more pragmatic approach: educating the public and slowly striving for a republic without calling for an immediate referendum. Additionally, achieving a republic would not address the two major problems of the Spanish society: improving the economy²⁷ and getting rid of political corruption, as well as new challenges such as the global pandemic.

To conclude, the monarchy is not of extreme importance. However, Spain has other matters to focus on. It is simply not the time for a structural revolution, and Spaniards must understand that such a change is unlikely to happen in the near future.

²⁷ Spain is still suffering from the 2008 recession, with 16.2 percent of the population without a job (EpData).

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