Spain’s Growing ‘Indignation’ Protests

In protests from the Middle East to the American Midwest, people are confronting the question of whether societies should be organized for the benefit of the broad population or the wealthy elites. That question is being expressed perhaps most sharply in protests spreading across Europe, including Spain, reports Pablo Ouziel.

By Pablo Ouziel

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While “Europe’s slow-motion financial collapse” as Mother Jones magazine described it in a June 6 article continues apace, Spain, like other European states continues to implement anti-social/neo-liberal policies in the face of strong opposition from the citizenry.

It has been one month since Spain’s “Indignados” (Indignant Ones) movement non-violently claimed 60 city-squares across the country, calling for economic democracy, political justice and peace.

Since then, much has happened within Spanish borders, and what is happening there is clearly spreading across Europe, where we have witnessed social movements making similar demands.

We have observed the rise of a parallel movement in Portugal where most city squares have also been camped on by “Indignados” and where only hours before the country’s general elections protesters in Lisbon were attacked and beaten by police.

We have witnessed how on that same night, in Athens, Greece, 80,000 protesters congregated in the city’s main square in opposition to the country’s “austerity measures,” waving banners in solidarity with the “Indignados” of Spain and of other European countries.

In Paris, we have seen the Bastille taken non-violently by French “Indignados” only to be quickly reclaimed by the country’s police force.

Wherever you look in Europe, you hear the same cries of indignation. In some countries with more intensity than others, but the cry is becoming louder everywhere, and what may seem like a slow-motion financial collapse is rapidly becoming an accelerated social catastrophe.

Specifically in Spain, despite the political elite depicting a country recovering from the financial collapse, everyday things are getting worse economically, politically and socially.

Protests, although nonviolent for the most part, could be on the verge of becoming violent unless the political and economic elites begin to make some concessions.

On the economic front, Spain began the month of June with comments from the European Commission about the potential that the country will miss its economic growth and budget-deficit targets for the year. The commission’s recommendation was more economic “reform.”

Then a report from the ratings agency Moody’s pointed out that the high Catalan deficit was affecting the solvency of the whole of Spain.

A few days later, in the region of Castilla-La Mancha, the incoming administration of the
rightwing Popular Party (PP), before even taking office, proclaimed that the region was “totally bankrupt.”

Then, the National Statistics Institute revealed that Spain’s property sales in April had been the lowest since the institute began reporting in 2007.

Obviously, this stream of negative news, coupled with discussions taking place in Europe regarding a potential debt default by Greece, affected Spain’s bond sales and moved the country one step closer to a bailout, or a default followed by its subsequent debt restructuring.

On the political front, June has been equally intense. The government has approved by decree changes in collective bargaining agreements after failed negotiations with the two major trade unions in the country.

The government also approved the extension indefinitely of the Spanish military mission in Libya and announced the creation of a new NATO operations center to control Spanish airspace and help missions coordinated from Southern Europe.

On the social front, as of the first of June, the government warned that the “Indignados” could not remain camped on city squares much longer.

Spain’s Prime Minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, addressed the request from the “Indignados” for electoral reform by telling them the changes could only be possible through consensus from all political parties, a way to respond without complying.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair visited Spain with the advice that “demonstrators should be heard but not allowed to govern.”

Yet, according to a survey published by the newspaper El Pais, there exists wide support (81 percent) for the movement among the Spanish population.

Among the supporters are public intellectuals, such as Vicent Navarro, Arcadi Oliveras and Eduardo Galeano, along with political figures such as Santiago Carrillo, who was the secretary general of the Spanish Communist Party and a key voice during the country’s transition to democracy, and Cayo Lara, the coordinator for the third largest political party in Spain, Izquierda Unida.

Even RosalÃa Mera, who is Spain’s richest woman according to Forbes Magazine, has expressed public support for the “Indignados.”

Reacting to recent events, commissions of the “Indignados” from across the country met in Madrid’s Puerta del Sol Square to discuss the movement’s future.

Through a process of popular assembly, they agreed to three key actions:

First, to boycott the country’s Town Halls as the new governments were sworn in following the recent regional and local elections; second, to abandon city squares and move their social action into city neighborhoods in an attempt to broaden the movement’s involvement with the rest of the citizenry; and third, to continue organizing protests on specific dates focused on particular issues, including a firm commitment to a global protest of “Indignados” on Oct. 15.
The first nationwide coordinated initiative since the spontaneous movement mushroomed on May 15, the boycott of Town Halls, was well represented by “Indignados” across Spain.

Demonstrators blocked entrances to Town Halls, climbed onto the balconies, prevented official cars from exiting car parks, disturbed investiture sessions with speeches, and followed politicians across cities as they celebrated their victories, shouting to them, “shame on you!”

Artur Mas, president of the Generalitat (the government of the Catalan autonomous region), was forced to arrive at parliament in a police helicopter, as thousands of “Indignados” blocked the entrance in an attempt to stop the region’s budget approval.

The protesters shouted: “You do not represent us!” The parliamentary session began with only half of the representatives able to enter the building.

In Valencia, the police charged at demonstrators injuring 12 and arresting five. To avoid further protests in that city, where the new government has ten of its members including its president facing corruption charges, Spain’s vice president, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, canceled a planned trip.

In the city of Madrid, police batons struck protesters. In Salamanca, five “Indignados” were injured. In Burgos, two were arrested. In Castellón, the protesters were violently dispersed as they were in Vigo and in Santiago de Compostela.

Following the arrests across the country, spontaneous demonstrations followed in front of police headquarters demanding the prompt release of those detained. Most protesters were released on bail.

It seems clear, when one takes an in-depth look at events unfolding in Spain, that these protests have hit a nerve throughout Spanish society, despite the fact that the movement is practicing a form of nonviolent direct democracy which is not familiar to most Spaniards, nor for that matter to most citizens in Western-style democracies.

Spain’s political, social and economic climate is beginning to be shaped, at least partially, by these cries of indignation.

Nevertheless, there is a danger that unless economic and political elites begin to listen and engage in some serious dialogue with the “Indignados” instead of sending out the police to attack them the nonviolence could quickly turn to violence.

Spain’s nonviolent protesters are not Gandhi’s well-trained and disciplined nonviolent peacemakers with months of rigorous training in Gandhian Ashrams. This is a one-month-old spontaneous and diverse movement, which is only now beginning to organize and present specific demands.

Whether the “Indignados” will turn violent if the police continue to beat them or whether the country’s elites will begin addressing the popular demands rising from the streets we will learn only as events unfold.

Pablo Ouziel’s articles and essays are available at pabloouziel.com