

# Spain's 'Indignados'

Friday 10 June 2011, by [ROBINSON Andy](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2011).

Madrid's iconic central square, La Puerta del Sol, was the site of a strange convergence of the cyber age and the Middle Ages during the first days of what would soon be labeled (in English) "the Spanish revolution." As the Madrid police prepared to eject the first "indignados"—a hundred or so twentysomethings protesting mass youth unemployment and Spain's atrophied electoral politics—legally savvy bloggers tweeted: "Puerta del sol is on the Cañada Real grazing paths; we have the right to sleep there."

The fledgling protest movement was audaciously claiming protection under a thirteenth-century royal decree—still defended passionately by environmental groups—that protects the rights of shepherds to camp out with their flocks for three consecutive nights on the hundreds of ancient grazing routes that crisscross the country, even traversing major cities like Madrid.

It was just one example of the naïve ingenuity of the new movement, born months earlier during the battles against the government's hated Internet piracy legislation, furiously opposed by Spanish youth, who consider free downloads a cultural right. In February web-based groups like Real Democracy Now and Don't Vote for Them had campaigned tenaciously against the law and the corporate entertainment lobbies that backed it. Three months later these same networks kicked into action in defense of the indignados. By the evening of May 17, thousands had made their way to the square, some with V for Vendetta Guy Fawkes hacker masks. Protecting the ideal of free space and creative commons on the Internet had metamorphosed into the defense of the right to occupy the Puerta del Sol.

As the May 22 regional and municipal elections approached, ever greater swaths of Spain's disaffected youth joined the protest. The square filled with makeshift tents and tarpaulins, housing as many as 1,000 indignados. Thirty thousand turned out for mass assemblies whose demands ranged from social housing to electoral reform. A three-story poster of Nazi Heinrich Himmler with Mickey Mouse ears and a euro sign Photoshopped over the swastika hung outside Spain's big-name department store El Corte Ingles. Generators inserted into the pompous statue of King Carlos III astride his horse provided power for the PA system and an improvised canteen. Messages scrawled on dismembered cardboard boxes read Iceland Is My Goal (in reference to that country's plucky refusal to bail out foreign-held debt); Democracy Is a 2-Party Dictatorship and, parodying Ikea, Welcome to the Independent Republic of My Square.

A new website, Tomalaplaza.et, invited people to "take the square" wherever they happened to be, and by election day La Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona and the futurist Plaza Encarnación in Seville were also occupied by tens of thousands of young protesters. Police in Barcelona tried unsuccessfully to eject the Catalan indignados. In Madrid, where Puerta del Sol had become a focus of international media coverage, the authorities were reluctant to act. By the beginning of June, an increasingly bedraggled tent city remained, though strategic withdrawal seemed imminent with a new call to action planned for June 19.

Just who are these young indignados? No one really knows. The net-based pro-piracy campaigns were catalysts. A hard core of antiglobalization anarchists, with their placards of Sparta and Durutti, provided crash courses in direct democracy. Radical collectives came up to Puerta del Sol from the

legal squats in the old tobacco factory of Lavapiés, where Carmen-like cigar-makers once held the first strikes of the twentieth century. But most of the young indignados appeared from nowhere: university-educated, intensely networked 20- to 30-year-olds, many still living with their parents, all acutely aware that post-bubble Spain has little or nothing to offer them as unemployment soars and precarious part-time employment becomes the norm. Even during the boom years, Spanish youth generally worked on short-term contracts with no benefits. The labels *mileurista* (1,000 euros a month) or *ni-ni* (neither work nor studies) summarized their humiliation.

On Puerta del Sol, the political parties, even the communist-green Left Unity, whose program echoes the indignados' demands, were absent. So were the big labor unions. Procedures were refreshingly original or exasperatingly naïve. At the nightly assemblies, interminable debates on procedure ran into the early morning. The indignados ratified proposals on a dizzying array of issues, from food politics to feminism, unemployment to immigration, by raising both arms and wiggling their fingers.

But the most widely supported demands were surprisingly restrained: more accountable MPs; the abolition of the Senate, considered a talking shop for overpaid has-beens; a new electoral law to prize open a two-party system dominated by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's beleaguered ruling socialists and the conservative People's Party (PP) opposition. "We have alternation without alternatives," said Olga Arnaiz, a 26-year-old student protester.

Electoral reform may seem a modest demand for this lost generation. But in Spain, as elsewhere in the eurozone, politicians and bankers are joined at the hip in their response to the economic crisis.

Beyond Puerta del Sol, billboards display more apparently angry slogans: ¡Que No Me Engañen! (Don't try to fool me!), says one in smudgy ink. But this one is not an indignado protest. It is the advertising campaign for the new commercial banks that have replaced the nonprofit thrifts (*cajas*) in Zapatero's desperate attempt to impress the bond markets. One new bank is led by former finance minister and ex-IMF chief Rodrigo Rato. Rato briefly took up a top-dollar post at international asset manager Lazard Ltd. Shortly after leaving Lazard for the Spanish bank, Rato hired his ex-employer to oversee the underwriting for the bank's first share issue. Indignado, anyone?

The awakening of Spanish youth is long overdue, but the political scene offers few immediate reasons for optimism. The May 15 elections marked a massive hemorrhage from the socialists but the Left Unity alternative barely benefited, taking less than 7 percent of the vote. Racist candidates prospered, striking fear in the heart of immigrant communities. Latin American, North African and Eastern European immigrants now make up more than 10 percent of Spain's population, the most severely affected by the crisis. But the indignado movement—primarily white and Spanish—can provide little protection from the nativist resurgence. The only immigrants in the tent city on Puerta del Sol were already sleeping out in the center of Madrid after losing their homes in the housing collapse. A new green group, Equo, led by a former Greenpeace leader, may tap into the "indignado vote. But the big story here is that the Spanish right will certainly return to power in general elections this year or next and intensify the attack on social welfare and wages.

Nor is it clear what the movement's next step will be. Before withdrawing from Puerta del Sol, the assembly voted to take real democracy to the barrios, with weekly assemblies in local squares. But in the vast new suburbs of Madrid, far beyond Puerta del Sol, in a bleak landscape of residential sprawl and shopping malls, the plaza is a relic of the past. Here, a different set of indignados fume to right-wing chat-shows on PP-controlled Telemadrid.

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