A DIAGNOSIS ON DEVOLUTION

DESPITE THEIR LIMITATIONS, THE STATUTES OF AUTONOMY BORN OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION PROVIDED A POLITICAL FORMULA CAPABLE OF SATISFYING POPULAR DEMANDS.

ALBERT VILADOT JOURNALIST

ollowing the death of Francisco Franco in November 1975, the political scene in Catalonia, the Valencian Country and the Balearic Islands was largely dominated by demands for devolution. It was in Catalonia, where the sense of national identity was most pronounced, that the calls were loudest.

Throughout the forty years of dictatorship, all forces opposed to the regime had been demanding the restoration of Catalonia's self-governing status that had been abolished by Franco in 1939 on the grounds that it undermined the unity of Spain. Indeed the Civil War had been largely presented as a Crusade against Catalonia and Catalan nationalism, our country's most authentic and representative form of political expression. For Franco, Catalan nationalism and separatism were one and the same thing.

Despite repression and the loss of many lives, the Catalan language and culture were still very much alive at the end of the Franco period. It came therefore as no surprise when the children and grandchildren of the Catalans defeated in 1939 again took up a cause that commanded widespread popular support: that of political autonomy.

Already during the last years of the dictatorship, each and every organized act



of protest demanded the return to self-government. The aspiration was independent of political leanings. It enjoyed the support of all ideological movements, no matter how far to the left or to the right, with the exception of Franco's successors. As a result, Catalan political life revolved around the return of self-government during the years immediately following the dictator's death. Strenuous negotiations took place with successive governments in Madrid bent on perpetuating the centralist, anti-Catalan mentality of the Franco era.

While the politicians were talking, large-scale mobilizations took place in 1976 and 1977 and each time, the demand for political autonomy was inseparable from calls for the return of democracy and freedom for political prisoners. These mobilizations reached a peak on 11 September 1977, a few months after the first democratic elections in Spain. It is estimated that on

that day, the Catalan national holiday, almost a million people demonstrated peacefully in the streets of Barcelona in support of self-government. Neither the proclamation of the Republic in 1931 nor the entry of Franco's troops in 1939 had been marked by comparable turnouts and, according to the historians, the only precedent was the liberation of Paris in June 1944.

The now democratically elected central government finally gave way. First a provisional Catalan government was formed and then, after the approval of the democratic Constitution in 1978, the discussions that were to lead to the approval of the present Statute of Autonomy got underway. However, the Spanish Constitution granted self-government to all the regions of Spain, even those that had never asked for it. The universal institution of regional autonomy was the device invented by diehard centralists to play down the aspirations of those peoples of Spain who had really demanded self-government. Furthermore, the Constitution made it impossible for the three countries where Catalan is spoken (Catalonia, the Valencian Country and the Balearic Islands) to work together towards joint forms of autonomy.

Despite their limitations, the Statutes of Autonomy born of the Constitution

provided a political formula capable of satisfying popular demands. In the following years, elections were called, first in Catalonia and the Basque Country, and then in the remaining regions. Regional parliaments were constituted, which in turn were to elect presidents to form a government. The Catalan President was, and still is, Jordi Pujol, a Catalan Nationalist liberal. Voters in Valencia opted for a Socialist government and those in the Balearic Islands for the right-wing Coalición Popular. The different outcomes of the elections in the three Catalan Countries are symptomatic of the existence of very different degrees of national awareness.

In 1980 the Statutes of Autonomy were mere legal texts that had yet to be implemented. In theory the autonomous governments were granted jurisdiction in many fields, though there are slight differences between the various statutes. The central government retained power over the army, currency, international relations and macroeconomic structures while the autonomous communities were given legislative authority in such significant areas as education, culture, microeconomic policy, tourism, internal trade and secondary roads. The door was also left open to certain activities in the judicial field and to the establishment of regional police forces.

So far the successive governments in Madrid, whether formed by the Socialists or the centre parties, have applied the Statutes of Autonomy begrudgingly and with numerous restrictions. The main feature of the present-day political scene in the Catalan Countries is the tug-of-war between Madrid and the autonomous governments aimed at achieving a generous interpretation of the Statutes of Autonomy. The conflict is most pronounced in Catalonia owing to the fact that a Catalan nationalist party is in power.

The Statutes of Autonomy have been in force now for seven years and the majority view is that true self-government is still a long way off.

