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Editorial

Army Troglodytes in Spain

It is a basic principle of democracy that army officers do not publicly challenge the legitimacy of elected governments or talk about marching their troops into the capital to overturn decisions of Parliament. Yet that is just what has happened twice this month in Spain, a country whose 20th-century history compels it to take such threats seriously, even when the chances of insubordinate words' leading to insubordinate actions seems quite unlikely.

The response of the center-left government of Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has been appropriately firm, including the dismissal and arrest of one of the culprits, a senior army general. Regrettably, the center-right Popular Party, the main opposition group, seems more interested in making excuses for the officers than in defending the democratic order in which it has a vital stake.

Spain's swift and smooth passage to modern democracy after the death of Francisco Franco in 1975 makes it easy to forget the horrors of the civil war and the brutal dictatorship that preceded it. Those nightmares began when right-wing army officers rebelled against an elected left-wing government they considered to be illegitimate and too deferential to regional separatists.

Spanish society, Spanish politicians and, for the most part, Spanish military officers have come a long way from that era, moderating their views and deepening their commitment to democratic give-and-take. But the Popular Party has had a hard time getting over its electoral defeat nearly two years ago, days after the terrorist bombings of commuter trains in Madrid. It has never really accepted the democratic legitimacy of that vote. It is time for the Popular Party to move ahead. Spanish democracy needs and deserves vigorous bipartisan support.