

Chapter 2 Years of reform, 1931–1933

Key questions

- Why did the Conservative and Radical Republican parties leave the government so quickly?
- How successful were the government's agrarian reforms?
- What did the anticlerical laws achieve?

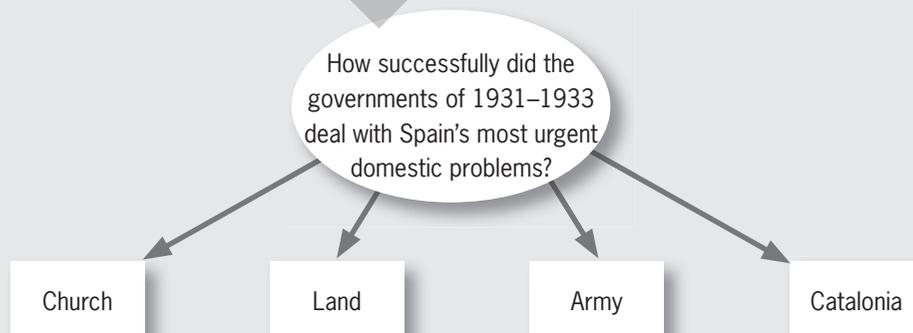
There was widespread enthusiasm shown for the Second Republic, referred to by many as '*La Niña Bonita*', the beautiful girl. Elections in June 1931 showed overwhelming support for the parties loyal to the Republic. However, this unity among Spaniards was short-lived. By 1933, the traditional conservative forces in Spanish society were horrified by the government's attacks on their vested interests. They vigorously opposed the reforms which tackled the Church, the army and the land. Equally, there was increasing unrest among the workers in the cities and the landless labourers in the countryside: both these groups felt that the pace of change was too slow. By September 1933, the government of Manuel Azaña appeared to have run out of reforming zeal and President Alcalá Zamora called fresh elections.

Timeline

April 14 1931	The Provisional Government took power
April-June 1931	Land, employment and army reforms introduced
June 28 1931	Elections for the Constituent Cortes
August-December 1931	Debates on the constitution
October 1931	Manuel Azaña appointed Prime Minister
December 1931	Castilblanco and Arnedo killings
August 1932	General Sanjurjo's attempted coup
September 1932	Catalan Statute and Agrarian Reform Law passed
January 1933	Casas Viejas massacre
September 1933	Azaña dismissed: elections called for November

Take note

As you work through this chapter, consider each of the government's reforms in turn, especially the extent of their success. Use the information you gather to complete the following diagram:



Pact of San Sebastián, 1930

In August 1930, a meeting led by Niceto Alcalá Zamora was held in San Sebastián in northern Spain. It was attended by representatives of most republican groups, who agreed to form a revolutionary committee which aimed to end the Spanish monarchy.

Biography

Niceto Alcalá Zamora

1877–1949

Alcalá Zamora became the first Prime Minister of the new Republic. He was a landowner from Córdoba, and had served as a minister during the time of the monarchy. A devout Catholic and a firm conservative, he resigned in October 1931 in protest over the government's proposed religious reforms. In December 1931, the Constituent Cortes elected him President of the Republic and he held the office until he was forced to resign in April 1936, a few months before the outbreak of the civil war. Although he was essentially loyal to the Republic, he soon gained a reputation for meddling in the affairs of government.



The Provisional Government

As Alfonso XIII left the country on 14 April 1931, a revolutionary committee formed in **San Sebastián** the previous August took over the running of the country as a provisional government.

In May 1931, a coalition government took office in Britain. It consisted of representatives from just two parties, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Its leaders were able to agree a joint programme very quickly. In Spain in 1931, the Provisional Government was also a coalition. However, it drew its membership chiefly from four parties which spanned the whole political spectrum from Left to Right. These parties had agreed in 1930 on just one policy: the ending of the Spanish monarchy. Once this had been achieved, the divisions between the parties became more apparent and the grand coalition soon began to break up. In October the Conservatives, under their leader **Alcalá Zamora**, withdrew their support for the government in protest at its anticlerical programme; and, in December, the Radical Republicans were excluded from government by the new Prime Minister, **Manuel Azaña**.

Biography

Manuel Azaña

1880–1940

Azaña was a lawyer and writer who had been an active republican for many years. He became Minister of War in 1931 and succeeded Alcalá Zamora as Prime Minister in October that year. The leader of the middle-class progressives, and an immensely talented politician and speaker, he was regarded by many Spaniards as 'the strong man of the Republic'. He earned the determined opposition of the Right because of his fierce anticlericalism.



Spanish Socialist Republican Party (PSOE)

Wanted radical social change in the interests of workers and landless peasants
Strongly anticlerical
Main representative: Largo Caballero, Minister of Labour

Liberal Reformers

Strongly anticlerical
Mostly middle class
Main representative: Manuel Azaña, Minister of War 1931, Prime Minister 1931–1933

Radical Republican Party

Despite its name, a party which represented the interests of the middle classes
Alarmed by the radicalism of the Socialists
The main governing party in the years 1934–1936
Main representative: Alejandro Lerroux

Conservatives

Wanted to continue the pre-1931 system of government, but without the monarchy
Represented the interests of major landowners, the army and, most of all, the Catholic Church
Main representative: Niceto Alcalá Zamora, Prime Minister 1931, President 1931–1936

Main political parties in Spain, 1931

The new government faced a daunting number of problems, which ministers believed required rapid, and in some cases, drastic action. However, their enthusiasm for change was not shared by all Spaniards. While most workers and agricultural labourers hoped for speedy and dramatic improvements in their living and working conditions, right-wing forces did their utmost to resist any measures which would transform Spanish society.

The Constitution of the Second Republic, December 1931

The most pressing tasks for the new government were to call elections for a **Constituent Cortes** and to establish a new **constitution**. The elections were held in June, and the Spanish electors gave overwhelming support to the new Republic. The Socialists were the only organised party in Spain at the time, and thus it was no surprise that they won 115 seats and became the largest party in the Cortes. The right-wing groups had not expected the fall of the monarchy and their disorganisation was reflected in the fact that they took barely 50 seats. The parties which supported the government had a massive majority of seats.

Debates on the creation of a constitution for the new Republic began in August and the final version was agreed in December. Some of its terms worried the Conservatives. The influence of the Left on the government was apparent by the description of Spain as 'a democratic republic of workers of all kinds'. Women received the vote for the first time and a number of anticlerical provisions restricted the rights of the Catholic Church. Many moderate and conservative Spaniards who had supported the Republic now became concerned at the radical direction which the government was taking.

Army reforms

The Minister of War, Manuel Azaña, moved speedily to tackle over-manning in the army. He announced that all officers would be allowed to transfer to the reserve list on full pay (in effect retiring from the army). This was an unusually generous offer, which was taken up by some 8,000 officers. Azaña also tried to reduce the size of the military budget by cutting the period of military service to one year and by closing the military academy at Saragossa.

These measures did not improve the efficiency of the armed forces, nor did they increase the doubtful loyalty shown by officers towards the Republic. Reducing the size of the officer class inevitably closed up several avenues of promotion for junior officers, who would express their disillusion by flocking to the Nationalist cause in 1936. Moreover, Francisco Franco had been the commanding officer at the Saragossa academy since 1927. Here he had instilled into young officers his belief that the army was Spain's most powerful protector against both external and domestic enemies. His farewell address to the cadets was, not surprisingly, deliberately insulting towards Azaña.

Glossary

Constituent Cortes

The elected assembly that had the power to draw up and approve the Republic's constitution. Although this had been achieved by December 1931, the Constituent Cortes continued in office until fresh elections were held in November 1933.

Constitution

The basic laws and principles by which a country is governed.

June 1931 election

Supporting the government: 365 deputies

Socialists: 115 seats
Left-wing Republicans combined: 150 seats
Radical Republicans: 90 seats
Conservatives: 10 seats

Opposing the government: 50 deputies

Anti-Republican groups: 50 seats (including 20 Monarchists)

Biography

Francisco Largo Caballero

1869–1946

In 1925, Largo Caballero became head of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and of its union, the UGT. He held moderate socialist views until a right-wing government came to power in Spain in 1933. His attitudes then shifted dramatically leftwards, as he took up the views of the more extreme Socialists who aimed at a violent revolution. He held the office of Prime Minister for a short period during the civil war (September 1936–May 1937).



The UGT

The *Unión General de Trabajadores* (General Workers' Union) was founded in 1888. It grew rapidly during the Second Republic, largely because of the large number of agricultural workers who joined it.

Agrarian reforms

The Minister of Labour, the Socialist **Largo Caballero**, issued a number of decrees in May 1931 which were designed to address the most pressing problems that faced agrarian workers, especially in the south of the country. He established an eight-hour day for agricultural labourers, thus introducing overtime pay for the first time in the countryside. Wage disputes were to be settled by mixed committees of labourers and landowners. The rights of small tenant farmers were protected to ensure that they could not be evicted from their farms without good cause.

The most significant reform on agricultural employment was the Law of Municipal Boundaries. This required landowners to offer jobs to those living within their municipality before importing migrant workers. This practice was common in the countryside because it enabled landowners to keep wages low as well as neutralising the effectiveness of any local strikes.

Taken together, the decrees on agriculture had a dramatic effect on the rights of both landowners and peasants. The balance of power in the countryside had shifted decisively towards agricultural workers, who flocked to join the FNTT, the agricultural section of the socialist union, the **UGT**. For their part, the landowners did their best to thwart the decrees and were often successful in evading them completely. The bitter hostility which the southern landowners developed towards the Republic helped to fuel the growth of right-wing and conservative parties over the next few years.

Church-state relations

Of all the problems which the government faced, the relations between the Spanish state and the Catholic Church proved to be the most divisive. Apart from the Conservatives, the diverse parties which made up the Provisional Government were united by a strong and aggressive anticlericalism. The Church had been a powerful supporter of both the monarchy and the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, and was naturally viewed as a massive obstacle to progress and social change. Shortly after the Republic was proclaimed, the Pope indicated to Spanish bishops that they should respect and obey the new government, but his advice went largely unheeded. In May 1931 Cardinal Segura, the leader of Spain's Roman Catholics, issued a strongly worded letter in which he urged Catholics to vote against government parties in the forthcoming elections. There was an immediate reaction to his statement. He was expelled from the country and, in a separate development, crowds burned down churches in Madrid and in other cities.

It was in this context that the government and the Constituent Cortes discussed the religious clauses proposed in the constitution. Articles 26 and 27 separated Church and state, provided for the closure of all religious schools and threatened to phase out the state subsidy to the clergy over the next two years.

These attacks on the Church, while they might appear understandable in the context of the time, were at best unwise, at worst self-defeating.

On a national level, the country simply could not afford to build, equip and staff thousands of new schools to replace the church schools and their teachers. Articles 26 and 27 encouraged local councils to take a spiteful and petty attitude to the Church. In many towns and villages, religious processions were banned, the ringing of Church bells was prohibited and priests were sometimes forced to remove religious sculptures from the outside of their churches. Many ordinary parish priests, often barely better off than their parishioners, had supported the establishment of the Republic, and they relied on the state subsidy to provide them with most of their income. Its threatened removal over the next two years, coupled with the open hostility of local authorities, was to alienate them from the Republic and was instrumental in fostering the creation of an alliance of right-wing Catholic parties by 1933.

Taking it further

In a speech to the Constituent Cortes in August 1931, Azaña declared that 'Spain has ceased to be Catholic'. Revisit the information on the Church in Chapter 1. To what extent was Azaña's claim justified? How might Catholics react to his statement?

Changes in the government, October 1931

The government's attacks on the Church caused a major political crisis in October 1931. The Prime Minister and the Minister for Home Affairs, both Conservatives and devout Catholics, resigned in protest. Their presence within the government had reassured the Right: their departure made the government appear even more radical. Moreover, the new Prime Minister, Azaña, excluded Lerroux's Radicals from his government, which alarmed the latter's middle-class supporters. The new government now depended on the support of left-wing groups and parties in order to pass its reforming programme. Azaña's government was determined to carry out two significant reforms: a major agrarian reform and the granting of **autonomy** to Catalonia.

Glossary

Autonomy

The right to self-government granted to one or more regions of a country.

Agrarian

Relating to agricultural or rural matters.

The Agrarian Reform Law, 1932

Largo Caballero had already addressed the most pressing **agrarian** problems in 1931; the government now sought to build on these reforms. They aimed at nothing less than a comprehensive programme of land redistribution to meet the needs of peasants and tenant farmers in central and southern Spain. This policy ignored the small farmers in the north of the country, most of whom had to work as well as farm in order to survive. The reform which was finally enacted horrified major landowners. An Institute of Agrarian Reform was set up to tackle the land question. Any estate of more than 23 hectares could be confiscated, and could subsequently be used to resettle farmers on smallholdings of sufficient size to provide a decent income. Although this seemed to be a highly radical scheme, the reform turned out to be meaningless. The Institute never had sufficient funds to buy out the landowners and, in its first year of activity, resettled only a few thousand families.

The failure of the government's agrarian reforms had long-term implications for its survival. Members of the agricultural union, the FNNT, were dismayed at the government's apparent inability to respond to their grievances. This was to encourage growing opposition among the Socialists and within the UGT as a whole towards the moderate and modest reforms carried out by the government.

The Catalan Statute, 1932

Many British people know just two things about Catalonia: the sandy beaches of the Costa Brava and the sporting prowess of FC Barcelona. Catalonia is much more than this. Economic development since the late nineteenth century made the region one of the wealthiest and most industrialised regions of Spain. It possesses its own individual and cosmopolitan culture, less Spanish than Mediterranean, thanks to its long traditions of international trade. Most Catalonians speak their own Catalan language rather than Spanish.

Glossary

Plebiscite

When the whole electorate of a country or region vote to decide on a single question of importance.

Catalonia was harshly treated during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. Many features of Catalan culture were suppressed and the modest powers of home rule which had been conceded were revoked. These actions only served to boost Catalan nationalism and, in 1931, most of the region's population expected the Madrid government to agree to their demands for increased autonomy. In a **plebiscite** in that year, over 99% of the votes cast were in favour of sweeping powers of self-government. The Catalan Statute of 1932 devolved considerable powers in domestic affairs to a Catalan parliament in Barcelona.

This reform meant that the Republic gained the overwhelming support of a whole region of Spain, apart from a small number of opponents drawn mostly from the middle classes. Within a wider context, however, Catalan autonomy was viewed by Spanish nationalists, and crucially by the army, as undermining the unity and integrity of the whole country.

Repression and unrest

The Second Republic faced opposition from the very outset, from both the left and the right of the political spectrum. The anarchist trade union, the CNT, was vigorously opposed to what it perceived as a middle-class government which ruled in the interests of the few and not the many. It was prepared to foster strikes, in cities and in the countryside, aimed at promoting a national revolution. The forces of the Right were not as well organised, but developed into an opposing force which was at least as strong as that created by the Left.

The government's response to unrest was surprisingly harsh and reminded many Spaniards of the repressive policies of the monarchy. A CNT-inspired strike of telephone workers took place in July 1931, largely in protest at foreign involvement in Spain's telephone system. The government called out the Civil Guard, which destroyed the strike with unnecessary violence, killing 30 strikers.

Further evidence of Civil Guard brutality occurred at the end of 1931. The CNT had planned a general strike in agricultural regions, but it failed to take off. The peasants in the tiny village of Castilblanco were unaware of the strike's failure and took their own action. They reacted with violence against Civil Guards who were sent to the village, killing four of their number. A few days later, the Civil Guard opened fire on striking workers in the town of Arnedo in the north of the country, killing eleven people, including women and children.

Taking it further

Suggest some reasons which might explain the government's determination to act swiftly and harshly against unrest.

Most Spaniards deplored the Civil Guards' ferocious behaviour, and blamed the government for the many deaths and injuries suffered by largely innocent people. The government placed responsibility on the Guards' commander, General Sanjurjo, who was dismissed. For a brief period, Sanjurjo posed a threat to the Republic's stability. He was opposed to Azaña's military reforms and, like many army officers, resisted the granting of autonomy to Catalonia. In August 1932, he proclaimed an uprising, not against the Republic itself, but against the current government. The attempted coup was a miserable failure, and Sanjurjo was captured and imprisoned. However, the easy defeat of the rising energised the supporters of the Republic, and helped speed up the passing of the Catalan Statute and the Agrarian Reform Law.

Casas Viejas, 1933

The events at Casas Viejas seriously discredited Azaña's government, and were a major factor in the government's fall in late 1933. The farmers in the town of Casas Viejas were angry at the slow pace of agrarian reform and, inspired by CNT agitators, rose against the Republic in January 1933. They attacked the local barracks of the Civil Guard, killing several of their number. Retribution was rapid and severe. Reinforcements were sent to the town, including members of the Assault Guard, which had been formed to counter urban violence. Armed with light artillery and with aerial support, they were determined to wipe out resistance. Twenty anarchist prisoners were shot in cold blood, some of them after prolonged periods of torture. Houses were set on fire, including that of the anarchist ringleader, known as 'Six Fingers', and many people were burned alive.

The effects of the Casas Viejas massacre were lasting and profound. Most of the working class, and the landless peasants, had been strong supporters of the Republic from the outset. They became increasingly bitter and disillusioned. The Right saw in this affair the opportunity to develop a successful propaganda campaign against the government, and to bring together right-wing forces into a single group with the aim of taking power at the next elections. These could not be delayed for long. In the autumn, President Alcalá Zamora dismissed the government and called fresh elections to the Cortes for November 1933.

Successes of the Second Republic

It would be easy to consider the whole period 1931–1936 as leading inevitably to the Civil War that broke out in July 1936. This is perhaps a mistaken view to take. If we look at the government of 1931–1933 in its own right, and without any reference to subsequent events, we can see that it had substantial achievements to its credit.

- All Spaniards were granted a wide range of civil and political rights, including the granting of the vote to all women. The laws on civil marriage and divorce, which were protected by the constitution, were the most advanced in Europe at the time.
- Workers in industry were granted an eight-hour day, along with other benefits such as paid holidays.
- The rights of agricultural workers were strengthened, including security of tenure for tenant farmers and increased wages for landless labourers.
- Despite its limitations, the Agrarian Reform Law did attempt to tackle the land question.
- There was some attempt to tackle over-manning within the armed forces.
- The position of the Catholic Church within Spanish life was severely restricted, and a start was made on educational reform.
- Perhaps the government's greatest success was the Catalan Statute, which settled a long-standing grievance and encouraged most Catalonians to give strong support to the Republic.

Conclusion: How far were the actions of the Second Republic mistaken?

The Republic came into existence at a time of global economic difficulties. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 was followed by a world depression which hit Spain as much as other European countries. Moreover, Primo de Rivera's grandiose public works schemes had saddled the country with substantial debts that had to be repaid. Thus the government was left with little money to fund urgent reforms, and this helps to explain the failure of the Agrarian Reform Law, which was not supported with sufficient funds to tackle successfully the question of land reform. Ministers might have been able to increase government revenue by increasing taxes on more wealthy Spaniards, but they were not prepared to take such action.

The government's fierce attacks on the Catholic Church were ill-advised and mistaken. In April 1931, most Catholics were prepared to support the Republic but they were shocked by the strong hostility shown to their religion at both national and local levels. They were upset that anticlericalism had been written into the Constitution, the basic law of the Second Republic. The Church's response was to support the creation of right-wing Catholic groups which aimed to reverse all the government's anticlerical laws.

However, the government's greatest mistake was its failure to appreciate just what had happened in April 1931. The monarchy had vanished, but there remained the vastly powerful traditional conservative forces which had sustained it for so long. The government made no real attempt to compromise with these forces. On the contrary, ministers behaved as if they would be in power for many years, and ignored the legitimate fears and concerns of many Spaniards. Thus there developed an organised right-wing opposition consisting of major landowners, army officers and the Catholic Church. Over the next few years, they were to play havoc with the hard-won reforms of 1931–1933.

Activity: Successes and failures of the Second Republic

- Using your notes from this chapter, draw up a review of the governments of 1931–1933, looking at the key areas of reform and rating their success.
- Write a speech to address the Spanish Cortes arguing either for more time for the reformers or for a change of government based on your review.
- Write a newspaper article summarising the problems faced by whoever takes over in November 1933 and giving advice, from the point of view of either a leftwing or right-wing observer.
- Draw up an action plan with which to brief the new government.