

A modern, professional Monarch

PROFILE OF HRH FELIPE VI

HM THE KING OF SPAIN

There is a word that comes to many people's minds when they meet King Felipe VI of Spain: he is a professional. While the reigning style of his father, King Juan Carlos, who abdicated three years ago, was remarkably colourful as he improvised – often deploying his own charisma as a political tool – to guide Spain from dictatorship to democracy in the 1970s, Felipe was painstakingly groomed for the job as a modern, meticulous head of state.

Different eras require wholly different profiles. On taking up the throne on June 19, 2014, King Felipe promised his subjects “a renewed monarchy for new times”. With his consort, Queen Letizia, Spain's first monarch to take up the throne in the democratic era has made the Royal Household more transparent in the wake of the country's corruption scandals, while also maintaining a studied attitude of discreet neutrality during an extremely lively political period. King Felipe faced a considerable test to his professional credentials early in his reign during Spain's almost year-long political crisis stretching from inconclusive elections in December 2015 to November of last year, as well as the ongoing dispute between pro-independence leaders in Catalonia and the Spanish government in Madrid.

Having put the monarchy back on an even keel, raising approval ratings that dipped as low as 3.6 out of 10 under King Juan Carlos back to a respectable six, Felipe VI has this year been able to return to the important business of promoting Spain abroad and reinforcing relations with global partner nations. In this context, Spain's king and queen are finally to make a State Visit to the United Kingdom that had seemed doomed by circumstances – cancelled in 2016 due to Spain's political uncertainty, and once again this year owing to the UK's unexpected snap election held in June.

A Law and Economics graduate who then took a Master's in International Relations at the Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington DC, Felipe VI of Bourbon and Greece feels he was born to serve what he calls the “common good of all Spaniards”, and, with the lost year of 2016 behind him, has undertaken more than 40 official visits abroad since his characteristically low-key coronation.

Felipe effectively became Spain's royal attaché to the important region of Latin America once he had undergone the required diplomatic grooming, attending presidential swearings-in ceremonies in the region since 1996. As well

as cutting a leading figure in Ibero-American diplomacy, King Felipe has recently engaged with the governments of Portugal, Saudi Arabia and Japan on official visits, with his second mission to Morocco being discussed and the hope that he can represent Spain in Cuba before the Castro era comes to an end in 2018 with the announced resignation of Raúl Castro as president. Past meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russia's Vladimir Putin and the leaders of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have helped to forge the Spanish king's diplomatic mettle.

In the UK, King Felipe and Queen Letizia will be meeting with friends, following their presence at the Duke and Duchess of Wessex's wedding in 2011; and family, given that the Spanish royal line also descends from Queen Victoria. But the first State Visit by a Spanish monarch in 30 years will clearly include serious items on the agenda, particularly as Brexit continues to loom large over British relations with its European partners. For Britain, the timing is fortunate, with Spain being one of the key European states most willing to seek a constructive relationship and a free-flowing new partnership with a United Kingdom outside of the EU.

Aside from royal ties and a long tradition of friendship, the two countries' shared interest in making Brexit a smooth transition to a prosperous new bilateral relationship makes the visit an important one. The large numbers of expatriates on both sides and the importance of maintaining and reinforcing Spanish investments in the UK and vice versa are reasons for the two countries to work closely together during this testing period.

Earlier in the year, the UK's ambassador to Spain, Simon Manley, expressed positive expectations for the long-awaited royal engagement. “This State Visit will celebrate not only the long and deep royal and historic ties between our two countries, but also our strong relationship as partners bilaterally, within Europe and on the global stage. We enjoy close connections in terms of culture, commerce, education, science and innovation. This is an opportunity to celebrate and deepen those links.”

As many royal observers look forward to the splash of glamour guaranteed by the presence of Queen Letizia three decades since the last Spanish State Visit to London, the stage is surely set for King Felipe VI of Spain to expand his reputation for diplomacy and bridge-building at the start of a new bilateral relationship. **E**

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