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Director of
Central
Intelligence

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CIACO

NID 82-038JK

National Intelligence Daily

Tuesday
16 February 1982

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: 05-25-2011

~~Top Secret~~ 22

CO NID 82-038JK

16 February 1982

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SPAIN: Trial of Coup Plotters

The trial opening this week of rightists accused in the coup attempt a year ago could pose the severest challenge to democracy in Spain since that event.

A military court will begin on Friday to try the 32 officers and one civilian. Prosecutors have asked 30-year sentences for three accused ringleaders--General Armada, General Milans del Bosch, and Lieutenant Colonel Tejero--and much lighter sentences for most of the others.

The trial will be held in a volatile political atmosphere. Disarray in the governing Center Democratic Union Party has raised the possibility of early elections that could produce a Socialist government--anathema to many rightists in the military.

Comment: Much of the military is disenchanted with the government, but only a small minority has directly challenged it so far. The trial could weaken the resolve of the majority to stand in the way of the radicals, particularly if press coverage makes it appear that the military as a whole is being tried. Rough treatment for the highly respected Armada and Milans del Bosch also could make tempers flare.

The trial, moreover, may weaken King Juan Carlos's ability to restrain the military. Defense assertions that the plotters thought that they had the King's tacit consent could imply betrayal by Juan Carlos, who moved forcefully and publicly against the plotters after the attempt was under way. Such charges would be especially damaging because the King had long been close to Armada.

The government probably will be able to contain these challenges. Although the government and its parliamentary opposition both want verdicts that would discourage other disgruntled officers, they may try to limit military unhappiness through private assurances of good treatment and early pardons for those convicted. The sensitivity to military concerns shown by the government over the past year, combined with recent top-level personnel changes, will help the government keep ahead of discontent.

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