

THE CRACKDOWN

Yago Parra wanted to protest Spanish austerity measures. He never expected to become a symbol of the fight for free expression.

By Aly Brahe

Before leaving home, 17-year-old Yago Parra grabbed his black leather motorcycle jacket and slipped his arms into the sleeves. He reached back to free his long blonde locks from the leather collar. On his way out, Yago gave his mother, 41-year-old Carolina Garcia del Amo, two kisses, one on each cheek, and said they will talk later. “Ten cuidado,” – “Be careful,” – she said, as he stepped out the door.

It was September 29, 2012, a day that Spaniards remember with easy shorthand: 29S. The Plaza del Neptuno was packed. Thousands of people came to “Rodea el Congreso,” or, “Surround the Congress.” They chanted, shouted, sang, held signs. Yago stands in the thick of the crowd, raising his hands and chanting alongside his friends. This is far from his first protest. Like many Spaniards, the protestors are *indignado* – angry – with the government. Just four days before, on September 25, a similar protest took place in the same plaza. 25S was violent: the police used force to clear the area and disperse the participants. By the end of that night, 64 people were injured and 38 arrested.

But the violence associated with 25S did not deter Spaniards from taking to the streets. In some cases, it spurred them on. On September 28, while watching the news at home, 58-year-old nurse Montse Lopez heard Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy thank the people who had not gone to 25S. He claimed they were his supporters, but Montse had simply been out of town. In fact, she says, many Spaniards are unable to attend protests for economic, family, or personal reasons. As she watched the news, she grew more and more frustrated. “Don’t thank me!” she thought. Disgusted, she turned away from the television and called to her husband. “*Vamonos!!*” she yelled, “Let’s go!”

Like Yago, his friends, and thousands of others, Montse and her husband joined the call to Surround the Congress on 29S. But by 11:30 p.m., they were tired and ready to leave. Then Montse heard commotion. Turning her head towards the source, she watched as police, armed with riot shields and nightsticks, pushed down from Congress and into the crowd.

Yago was part of that crowd. When the police began charging, he did what everyone else did – he ran. Trailing behind him were six police officers. When the first blow landed on his back, it stripped him of his balance and propelled him forward. Stunned, he scrambled up again, only to catch another blow to his back. Instinctively, indignantly, Yago turned midstride to face his attacker, whose right arm was cocked above his head. It was the last thing Yago saw.

The conservative Partido Popular won Spain's November 2011 national elections by a huge margin. When the PP took control of Spain, it immediately began implementing huge austerity measures in order to control the Spanish debt crisis. Critical public sectors, including health, education, and even firefighting have suffered from major government funding cuts. The PP paired austerity measures with tax hikes, raising by three percent a sales tax on general goods such as alcohol, tobacco, CDs, DVDs, gas fuel, and funeral services. Other taxes rose, as well.

Meanwhile, Spain has the highest unemployment rate, at 26 percent, in the European Union. According to the National Statistics Institute (INE), roughly 6 million people are jobless. Since the real estate bubble burst five years ago, around 400,000 homes have been foreclosed. In Madrid, there are, on average, 150 evictions carried out each day. Spanish law demands that citizens pay the balance of their mortgages, even after the bank

has reposessed the property. With no income, many Spaniards have become squatters in abandoned buildings. Suicide has become an increasingly common occurrence. Just this past month, a man in Malaga drenched himself in gasoline and burned himself to death.

In response, citizens have staged massive protests, marches and strikes, hoping to reverse the government's crippling policy measures. Often, the protests have been met with force from police. On November 14, the major Spanish workers' unions staged a 24-hour general strike in cities across the country. The police arrested 142 people; 74 were injured that day, including a 13-year-old boy struck on the head by an officer in Tarragona. After a rubber bullet fired by the police hit her in the face, a 42-year-old woman in Barcelona went blind in one eye.

Carolina was sitting in a local Madrileño cafetería enjoying some drinks with her friends when she received an unexpected call from a friend, who had just seen Yago on television; he had been beaten. Carolina's heart dropped. Distraught, she asked the owner of the cafetería to turn the TV onto private Spanish news station La Sexta, who was broadcasting footage of the protest live.

But those cameras weren't getting everything. Here's what Carolina would miss: As soon as Yago's body hit the ground, a horde of photographers, journalists, and other concerned protesters surrounded him. The police officers had not left. They stood at Yago's feet and lurched at anyone who got too close. He lay motionless, unconscious on the ground, his hair spread wild about his head and blood dripping from his mouth. Next to him, a friend rocked on his knees hysterically, crying out his name.

From her position in the plaza, Montse saw the police charge. When Yago went down,

the crowd parted around him, and Montse saw him, too, lying on the ground. Like a sprinter from her starting blocks, Montse ran toward the body. His eyes were open, yet unseeing. He was not breathing. His friend began to scream – “Mi amigo!” he cried, “Mi amigo se muere!” – meaning, “My friend! My friend is dead!”

Montse’s heart sank, but she wasn’t ready to give up on the boy so soon. She took a deep breath and went to work.

Police aggression has not been limited to protesters; photographers and journalists are becoming increasingly targeted as well. At the 25S protest, 27-year-old Chema Martin, journalist for the *Diario Independiente Digital*, was struck in the head by police and hospitalized for brain trauma. Martin thought himself obviously identifiable as press by his bright vest labeled PRENSA (press), his small notebook, camera, and pen. The police “knew I was a journalist,” he insists. Today, when he covers protests, he also wears a bright orange skateboarding helmet.

While Chema Martin was coming face to face with police on Paseo del Prado, 41-year-old photojournalist Hugo Atman was stuck behind a police barricade at the corner of Plaza de las Cortes and the Plaza de Neptuno. Atman was part of a group of photographers and journalists who, prior to the charges, were physically removed from the crowd and detained within the police cordon while trying to cover the September 25 protest. “When we asked the police for permission to leave so that we could do our work, they wouldn’t let us.”

Inside the cordon, Atman says he saw the police break three journalists’ cameras, including one video camera. “If the police see you are recording something they don’t

want recorded, they break your camera,” he says. Atman and the other detainees were kept within the cordon for about an hour; by the time they were released, the police had already finished their charges. “It was the first time that I’ve seen the police interfering with our work.”

Atman saw continued interference on 29S, the day Yago was hit. Although he did not witness the actual attack, Atman was drawn to Yago by the video cameras illuminating the area and the crowd surrounding the body just moments after the fall. Within 24 hours, Atman’s photographs of the beaten boy were shared worldwide. Since that day, he says, the police are “crossing the legal lines in all of the manifestations, and especially with the journalists.”

As Montse knelt down to check on Yago, the first thought that ran through her mind mirrored the screams of his friend: She also thought he was dead. Examining him more closely, Montse discovered that Yago’s tongue had fallen to the back of his throat and was blocking his breathing. A professional nurse for nearly 40 years, Montse calmly and gently lifted his jaw to clear the airway. As she glanced over her shoulder, she saw the five policemen standing and staring over Yago’s feet. A sensation of fear ran down her spine, and her thoughts turned to Yago’s parents. Suddenly hyperaware of the cameras surrounding her, Montse moved her body in front of Yago so that the photographers couldn’t take pictures. She didn’t want Yago’s parents, wherever they were, to see their child in such a state.

Time seems to distort in extreme situations, and Montse couldn’t say whether the ambulance arrived in five or fifty minutes. When it did get there, Yago was breathing. Just as the emergency medical team lifts Yago, he began to regain consciousness. Her

work finished, Montse quietly left the scene.

Meanwhile, at the bar, Carolina held her breath. On live TV, she watched, horrified, as Yago, dazed and bloodied, was carried away by health workers. From the news, she couldn't tell if he was conscious, or even alive. "The image I saw on TV was so brutal," she says, "I thought my son was dead." Immediately, Carolina flew to her cell phone. Frantic, she called him. Connection dropped. No answer. She called again. Again, connection failed. No answer.

In an increasingly modern world, where a vast population has, essentially, a miniature computer in their pocket, information is about as mobile as the particles of air we breathe. With a few simple keystrokes, pictures, videos, and messages can be instantly uploaded from a cellphone to the Internet, and then shared worldwide. Unless, perhaps, you're a Spanish photographer covering the protests.

According to Atman, the police have vans with equipment that blocks all telephone and wifi signals. "When they start their charges, they activate the system. Without a phone, without a signal, you can't transmit anything – the only thing it can't block is satellite signal from the TV reporting vans."

48-year-old Madrid municipal police officer Javier Sierra Roca confirmed these vans exist. He says they serve as an antiterrorism tool, armed with a system to block signals used to detonate explosives. However, he says that it "is possible" that they can also be used to prevent protesters from uploading photographs of the protests.

Of course, the most this might do is delay the dissemination of these images. They may

not be uploaded or streamed in real time, but Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube are full of these pictures, from each of the thousands of protests since the “Spanish Revolution” began with the 15M movement on May 15, 2011. But the government has social media in its sites, as well.

In October, the government announced their proposal to ban photographing, filming, or publishing pictures and videos of police forces doing their job. The Spanish Ministry of Interior, along with the general director of the police asserted that the ban seeks to protect police officers from violent protesters. Under the proposed legislation, dissemination of images or videos online through social networking media would be considered a crime.

The ban is “completely against the Spanish constitution. They cannot do it,” says Juan Rubiño Mira, 35-year-old lawyer who works with the Comisión Legal Sol, an organization that works to inform and assist citizens who have been arrested or assaulted by police at protests. Rubiño says the changes to the criminal code “are meant to quiet the protests. It is repression pure and hard.”

It is not just the protests that the government seeks to silence. In August 2012, Tomas Fernando Flores, the newly appointed director of government-owned public radio station Radio3, made the decision to cancel Javier Gallego’s popular talk show, *Carne Cruda* (“Raw Meat”). Flores said the program was canceled for financial reasons. 37-year-old Gallego doesn’t believe him. He says that his show was “a really cheap one compared with other radio shows in Spain.” It was also something else: “It was a very political show that has a clear opposition to the government right now, and the past government as well. That was the reason,” Gallego insists. In response, Gallego launched *Carne Cruda 2.0* with private radio station Cadena SER.

Other popular shows have also been canceled. Journalist Ana Pastor, well-known as a

tough interviewer, was removed from Spanish public television, and critical Radio 3 hosts Juan Ramon Lucas and Toni Garrido were removed from their daily programs as well. “They took out all of the journalists who talked against them and have put in all of the principal decision making positions their own people – people that they know, people from their party, or journalists who have always been on their side,” said Gallego.

After seven failed calls, Carolina was finally able to connect. Inside the ambulance, Yago’s phone rang. He answered. His mother was the first to speak.

“Yago, how are you son? What happened?”

“I don’t know Mama, I don’t know where I am or what happened to me.”

Still dazed, Yago hung up. Carolina called him back. During the second call, Yago’s voice was more clear and focused. He assured her that he was okay, that he was beaten at the protest but the ambulance workers are taking care of him.

Despite his attack on 29S, Yago Parra has continued to attend protests in Madrid. He says, “the future is very black. It is darker every day. But we are hoping that what we are doing now [with the protests] is the start of something greater, something better.” Yago adds, “I don’t think there is anything that could stop me from going to the protests. From my own convictions, I will continue going until I am not physically able.”

Carolina Garcia del Amo is pursuing legal action in response to the beating of her son. But except for Atman’s photographs, and La Sexta’s video footage, Amo has little to

move her case forward. “The possibility of actually identifying who is to blame is very small,” she says. “It is very difficult because the police are not wearing identification, and they have large helmets so you can’t see their face...It is not impossible, but it is very difficult.”

Amo is not alone in this challenge. Many other journalists and protesters have great difficulty in legally pursuing their attackers, as identification is nearly impossible. Typically, Spanish police wear identification badges on the breast of their uniforms. These badges are meant to hold police officers accountable for their actions and, according to officer Roca, police are obligated to wear them.

In recent protests, these badges have been nearly invisible. Not only are the badges themselves extremely small, some police put gun vests over the ID numbers, while others put the numbers upside down to make identification difficult. According to Fernando Garcia, 46-year-old photographer for the *Diario Independiente Digital*, if the ID numbers were made larger and more visible, then it would be easier to identify who is to blame. “This is the problem,” says Garcia, “Who can you denounce? The police?” He shrugs. “Which one?”