

Spain's governing Peoples Party loses support in close vote

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Municipal elections on May 25 in Spain produced a much-anticipated loss of support for Prime Minister José María Aznar's right-wing Peoples Party (PP), following his support for the US led war against Iraq.

For the first time since 1991, the Socialist Party (PSOE) won more votes than the PP in local elections. The vote, however, was much closer than expected prior to the election. With opinion polls regularly showing more than 90 percent of the population opposed to Aznar's stance in support of the war, press and opposition politicians alike were predicting a wipeout for the PP in the municipalities. In the event, the Socialist Party was only slightly ahead with 34.7 percent, compared to 33.9 percent for the PP. Turnout in the election was 68 percent, compared with 64 percent in 1999.

Due to Spain's complex system of proportional representation and preference voting the final countrywide picture has yet to emerge but it is anticipated that the most sweeping changes will be in the autonomous regions and particularly the Basque country. The PSOE and PP are continuing to dispute seats in Alava and the shire of Vitoria in the Basque country. The PSOE wants the government to support its candidate, Javier Rojo, in the regional parliamentary seat of Alava in exchange for PSOE support for the PP candidate in the shire of Vitoria. According to the PSOE's Jose Blanco, there was a prior agreement concerning the two seats but Deputy Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy says the deal was to support the non-Basque nationalist candidates with the highest percentage of votes in the Basque country, which in the case of Alava and Vitoria are the government's candidates.

Horse-trading is taking place in other municipalities. In the community of Madrid, a coalition between the PSOE and IU (United Left) has ousted the ruling PP, while the post of mayor remains in the hands of the PP.

There are many reasons why the opposition votes were not as large as anticipated, not least of which is a broad recognition that, from the standpoint of the interests of ordinary working people, there is little to choose between

the PSOE and the PP. Since first coming to office in 1982, the PSOE has been the advocate of the type of economic austerity measures championed by the Bush administration in the United States. It was the ferocious assault upon workers' living standards carried out by the last PSOE government that paved the way for the rise of the PP.

But another crucial factor in favour of the PP was the disenfranchisement of a significant portion of the population in the Basque region through the banning of the nationalist alliance party, Batasuna. The ban meant that dozens of mayors and hundreds of town councillors from Batasuna were barred from re-election in Basque towns. Batasuna won 20 percent of the municipal vote in 1999. The Supreme Court struck 241 candidates off the electoral lists on the grounds that they were ex-Batasuna activists standing under other party names, although the Constitutional Court later reinstated 16, six of whom were winners of the elections in Basque country municipalities.

After being barred from standing in the election, Batasuna distributed phony ballot papers so supporters could cast a symbolic vote that would be nullified. Ten percent of the votes in the Basque region were void, compared with 1.3 percent nationwide. This represents a 12-fold increase in spoilt votes compared with the last election. It is estimated that if the municipal results were to be mirrored in the general elections to be held next year, the PP would lose office.

Aznar has used the political climate initiated with Washington's so-called "war on terrorism" to mount a legal assault against his political opponents in the Basque region and an intensified military offensive against the paramilitary separatist group ETA.

In February a newspaper linked to ETA, *Euskaldunon Egunkaria*, was closed down and its staff alleged that they were tortured while in custody. Prosecutors investigated a Basque regional parliamentarian who described the Spanish king as "the torturers' boss".

More recently, Javier Madrazo, leader of the Basque section of the Stalinist-led IU has been charged with libel.

He is accused of slandering the king, the royal family and Aznar during speeches made against the war in Iraq on two occasions in early April. Among the comments cited are a speech in which Madrazo said, “Aznar is a terrorist like those of ETA,” and “those who kill in Euskadi (the Basque Country) are just as much terrorists as those who lead the terrorist war in Iraq, just as Bush, Blair and Aznar are doing at this time”.

He also attacked King Juan Carlos’ “silence” over the Spanish government’s support for the US-led war in the face of near total opposition to it from the Spanish people, stating that this underlined “the undemocratic character” of the monarchy.

“Seeing as we pay for their palaces, yachts, skiing and riding holidays, it wouldn’t have been too much to ask that they shared society’s worry,” Madrazo said, pointing out that as the king is constitutionally the head of state and Captain General of the armed forces, Spain could not have entered the war coalition without his support.

State lawyers argue that to equate ETA with the president was equivalent to calling him “murderer or violator of all kinds of rights and liberties”. It was, they said, an intolerable attack on Aznar’s public standing. They also insist that Madrazo’s view of the king goes beyond free speech and reasonably expressed opposition to monarchies as a political system and showed “contempt” towards the royal family and “therefore by extension, towards a regime supported by the enormous majority of Spanish people and approved in the constitution.”

Since coming to power, Aznar has led a legal assault against those deemed “terrorist sympathisers” in the Basque region. His government has declared that any organisation, whether political groups or media, which are deemed to support ETA forfeit their right to carry out their activities.

While the focus of the anti-democratic measures has been ETA and the supporters of Basque separatism, they are part of a more general offensive against the democratic rights of the entire population. A Spanish defence ministry proposal to ban antiwar protests was recently leaked to the daily *El País* newspaper. Although disowned by the justice ministry, the defence department were said to have called for a ban on protests against “an armed conflict of an international nature” in which Spain was involved “with the aim of discrediting Spain’s participation”. The proposed “crime” would have carried a prison sentence of between one and six years. The government also attempted but failed to ban any mention of the war against Iraq in election material.

Just prior to the election on May 7 Aznar received a token pay-off for his support for the war in the form of a US announcement that Batasuna would be included on its list of terrorist organisations. On his way to meetings in the US,

Aznar is reported to have told journalists, “Now we can see what the point of certain support was.”

The increasingly naked suppression of political opponents has had the effect of deepening divisions within society. The ban on Batasuna and the charges brought against alleged ETA sympathisers has provoked substantial opposition in the population.

The reactionary politics and terrorist bombings of ETA, however, have served to alienate the organisation from broad sections of the population and sow political confusion. A series of bombings on the eve of the elections will have only aided the PP.

The election result reveals the inability of the official opposition parties, the PSOE, PCE (Communist Party of Spain), IU and the separatists alike, to articulate the political will of the mass of ordinary working people. In the aftermath of a deeply unpopular war that saw demonstrations in the millions across 57 cities and repeated polls of 98 percent opposition, the total turnout for the election was only four percentage points higher than four years ago. None of the opposition parties, despite various statements of opposition to the war, saw any significant increase in support.

All are hostile to the one political force that can defeat the plans of US imperialism for global hegemony, the international working class. They will thus inevitably fall in behind Aznar and seek to find a place for themselves in the post-Iraq-war world.

For the millions of ordinary working people opposed to both US imperialism and the attacks of the Aznar government in Spain, the task is to turn to the international strategy of the United Socialist States of Europe in a joint offensive alongside their fellow European workers against US imperialism and its supporters such as Aznar.



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