

Spain: Aznar routed as a result of mass anti-war sentiment

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Spain's general election, which saw the defeat of the right-wing Popular Party (PP) of outgoing prime minister José María Aznar, turned into a referendum on the Aznar government's support for Washington's war against Iraq. It came only three days after the terrorist bombing atrocity in Madrid that killed 200 and wounded another 1,500, which Aznar sought to exploit to justify his alliance with the United States. The upset victory for the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), which has criticised the invasion of Iraq, sent shock waves through bourgeois governments around the world—primarily in Washington and London.

The vote revealed a broad, deep and intense popular hostility to both the war and the government lies that have accompanied it—a sentiment that is by no means limited to Spain. It reflected the depth of public opposition—throughout Europe and in the United States—to the war-mongering of Aznar, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair and, above all, President George W. Bush.

The PSOE will form a government, having won 42 percent of the vote against the Popular Party's 38 percent in an historically high turnout of 77.2 percent—8.5 percent higher than the last general election in 2000.

The PSOE got the biggest number of votes of any party ever, 10.9 million—2.8 million votes more than in 2000. The PP's vote dropped by 700,000. Support for the PSOE was particularly high amongst young first-time voters.

The massive turnout was in large part the result of a surge of last-minute voters, who reacted to the Madrid bombings, and to the initial, entirely unsubstantiated claims of the government to have definitive proof that the culprits were from the Basque separatist ETA, by resolving to vote the Popular Party out of office. As evidence mounted that seemed to point to Al Qaeda, the conviction grew among broad masses of Spaniards, who had opposed the war from the start, that Aznar's support for the US invasion had heightened the threat of terrorist atrocities and politically implicated the government in the tragic loss of life that occurred on Thursday.

Aznar was considered by Bush to be a crucial European ally, second only to Britain's Blair. His ouster was described by the *Wall Street Journal* as having “dealt a stinging blow to President Bush's policies for combating Islamist terrorism and remaking the Middle East.” The *Journal* continued: “The Socialists' campaign had tapped into the broad opposition in Spain to the war on Iraq, so the party clearly drew fuel from the blasts in Madrid even while neither Basque separatists nor Al Qaeda was a confirmed culprit.”

Britain's *Independent* newspaper commented that “The sudden loss of power for Spain's ruling Popular Party, which joined Tony Blair in steadfastly supporting George Bush's ‘war on terror,’ is nothing

short of a political earthquake.

“With growing unhappiness over Iraq already eating into Mr. Bush's lead in the race for re-election, and Mr. Blair facing a crisis of credibility over his justification for the war, the Spanish upset could augur a total change in the political landscape for the three main protagonists in the war to oust Saddam.”

The election punctured the false image projected by the media of a broad popular consensus in support of the right-wing policies of Aznar, Bush and Blair. It laid bare an important political reality: the fact that each of these governments rests on an extremely narrow social base of support.

The immediate catalyst in Aznar's downfall was the exposure of his government's efforts to blame ETA for the series of bombs at the Atocha rail station and two smaller stations that have now claimed 200 lives and threaten still more deaths from among the injured. The naked character of the government's efforts to manipulate public outrage at the terrorist bombings fueled an explosion of anger, resulting in a victory for the PSOE.

The PP was anxious that ETA be blamed for the bombings because Aznar has portrayed himself as the most determined opponent of its terrorist tactics and the guardian of the territorial integrity of Spain. Aznar had focused on these issues, in large measure, to divert attention from his efforts to impose austerity measures and welfare cuts. At the same time, the government feared—with justification, as events have proven—that a popular perception that the bombings were the work of Al Qaeda or some sympathetic group would redound against the Popular Party and its prime ministerial candidate, Mariano Rajoy.

The vast majority of the Spanish people—90 percent, according to opinion polls—were opposed to the Iraq war and demonstrated in their millions against it in the fall and winter of 2003. Aznar, in similar fashion to his British counterpart, Tony Blair, had brazenly defied the popular will in giving full support to the US colonialist enterprise.

Within minutes of the Madrid bombings, Popular Party spokespersons made public statements declaring that ETA was responsible. On the afternoon of the outrages, Foreign Minister Ana Palacio instructed her ambassadors, “You should take every opportunity to confirm ETA's responsibility in these brutal attacks.”

Initially, the PP's tactics seemed to be working. Campaigning for the March 14 elections was suspended, and everything was given over to the March 12 official day of mourning and remembrance called by the government.

This was supposedly a non-political event, but the Popular Party had ensured by its propaganda that there would be no shortage of banners denouncing ETA as 11 million people—a third of the Spanish

population—took to the streets. The government described the rallies as a show of solidarity “with the victims, with the constitution and for the defeat of terrorism.” The reference to the 1978 constitution implicitly identified ETA as the culprit, since the constitution affirms the territorial integrity and unity of the Spanish state.

The fiction of a non-political protest was aided and abetted by the PSOE, whose leader, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, reportedly instructed his party to avoid any debate on a cover-up by the PP regarding the true authors of the outrages. On the 2-million-strong rally in Madrid and others throughout Spain, the protest was largely silent—superficially lending credibility to the image of national unity that was being assiduously promoted by the media.

Washington and London calculated that they too could use the Madrid tragedy as an occasion to assert the legitimacy of the “war on terror.” This was to be Europe’s 9/11—not simply because it was a horrific outrage, but because it would signal a further lurch to the right in foreign and domestic policy.

Bush laid a wreath at the Spanish embassy in Washington while praising Aznar as an ally and opponent of ETA. Blair, his Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and others made speeches on terrorism as the new threat to world peace and promised additional security measures.

But the appearance of national unity in Spain was illusory. As the weekend progressed, anger grew towards the PP for its continued insistence that ETA was its prime suspect, even as evidence to the contrary continued to mount.

ETA itself had twice denied any responsibility. The Cadena SER radio station quoted intelligence sources stating that they were 99 percent certain the attacks were carried out by Islamic extremists. Five men, three of them Moroccans, were arrested, of which one has already been accused of connections with a pro-Al Qaeda group.

Finally, on election-day morning, the government reported finding a video tape in a rubbish bin in which someone purporting to be Al Qaeda’s commander in Europe, identified as Abu Dujan al-Afghani, claimed responsibility for the bombings, which he described as “a response to your collaboration with the criminal Bush and his allies.”

None of this evidence can be accepted at face value, but what is certain is that the Popular Party government was unable to produce any substantive evidence backing up its claim that ETA was guilty. Interior Minister Angel Acebes was forced to issue a public denial of charges that the government had “twisted or hidden the evidence,” but to no avail.

Throughout Saturday, March 13, angry protests against the Popular Party escalated. Some 5,000 people gathered outside the PP headquarters, shouting, “Our dead, your war!” In the Basque city of Bilbao, 8,000 protested.

On election day, things came to a head. Protesters shouted “murderer” at Mariano Rajoy, as he cast his vote near Madrid. Aznar and his wife were booed and jostled as they cast their votes.

Notwithstanding the intensity and breadth of the popular opposition that led to the downfall of the PP, it would be a serious mistake to believe that the election of the PSOE will provide a political way forward for the working class in Spain, or anywhere else. This bourgeois party of the Spanish establishment is the entirely undeserving beneficiary of the mass hostility felt towards Aznar and the Iraq war.

Zapatero made a populist appeal against Aznar over Iraq, the alliance with Bush and the government’s right-wing domestic policies. He has said he favours bringing Spain’s 1,300 troops home from Iraq, and at one point declared that he would like to see Bush

lose the US presidential election.

However, no one should take such demagogy at face value. Not only did the PSOE agree to maintain silence prior to the election on the Popular Party’s distortions and lies concerning the Madrid bombings, but Zapatero immediately held out a hand of friendship to his defeated opponents. He praised Rajoy as a “dignified rival” and offered “collaboration in the affairs of the State.”

Zapatero said he would seek to reach parliamentary agreement with nearly all political groups: “The dialogue will be continuous and permanent,” he declared. He added that he would have regular meetings with the PP in order to ensure “unity of the political forces to concentrate all the efforts in the fight against terrorism.”

His commitment to “unity” also extends to the US. “My government will maintain cordial relations with all the governments of the world, and, of course, with the United States,” he said. He called for a grand international alliance against terror and an end to “unilateral wars.”

Zapatero’s opposition to the Iraq war and the occupation of the country is entirely tactical and pragmatic. It expresses the concerns of sections of the Spanish bourgeoisie that are critical of Aznar’s foreign policy, considering it to be too closely and uncritically aligned with Washington. The new prime minister calls for a resumption of Spain’s “traditional axis in foreign policy,” and an alliance with Germany and France, in particular. He views this as a means of curbing the unilateralist ambitions of Washington and ensuring a share in the spoils from the exploitation of the Middle East and elsewhere for the European powers.

Zapatero has placed caveats on his pledge to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq, saying he would do so by June 30 of this year “unless the UN takes control” or “unless there is a proper constitution in place.” This leaves him considerable room to maneuver, since Washington is intent on formally installing a puppet government by June 30 and declaring Iraq’s sovereignty to have been restored.

On the domestic front, the PSOE will not depart significantly from the right-wing austerity policies of the Aznar regime. It is fully committed to upholding the economic prescriptions of the European Union, which will require stepped-up attacks on jobs and social services. The party’s full embrace of the “war on terror” ensures, moreover, that it will continue the attacks on democratic rights that have been justified as necessary “war-time” measures.



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