

Spain: Zapatero chooses a business-friendly cabinet

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Spain's new prime minister elect, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, has chosen an executive for his new Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) government, which will be sworn in on April 18.

On March 14, the Spanish people booted out the hated right wing Popular Party (PP) government of Jose Maria Aznar in a result which shocked none more than the PSOE itself.

The new PSOE administration promises to be a government of crisis. It benefited from a surge of popular anger over the PP's lies seeking to blame the Basque separatist ETA for the March 11 terror bombs in Madrid and conceal mounting evidence of the probable responsibility of Islamist groups. The PP did so out of a well-placed fear that such a revelation would become a focus for the overwhelming opposition to Aznar's support for the Bush administration's illegal war of aggression against Iraq and a more general opposition to the government's right-wing economic and social nostrums.

The PSOE's majority came from a surge in the numbers voting, rather than a collapse in the PP's constituency. In many cases workers and large numbers of young people voted for the PSOE only because they calculated that this was the best way of forcing the PP from office. It hardly indicates a widespread confidence and support for the social democrats.

This creates major problems for the PSOE, which must do the bidding of big business under conditions where the majority of Spaniards are demanding a major shift in economic, social and foreign policy to the left. For example the PSOE was forced to pledge to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq and will be held accountable for any failure to do so. The party has also proclaimed its intent to clean up the corruption for which both the PP and itself have become notorious. And it will be looked to in order to ameliorate the legacy of suffering caused by the PP.

On top of this the PSOE did not obtain an overall majority. Having decided to form a government by itself, it will still have to achieve agreements with the Stalinist-dominated coalition Izquierda Unida (United Left) and the various nationalist parties from the autonomous regions—who will make their own demands in return.

Already three leaders of left nationalist parties: Josep Carod Rovira, general secretary of the Catalan Esquerra Republicana;

Begona Errazti, president of the Basque Eusko Alkartasuna and Bizen Fuster, president of the Aragon Chunta Aragonista have issued an open letter entitled: "For a second democratic and plurinational transition." In it they demanded changes in national plurality, culture and language policy through "the creation of federal structures" and other measures to strengthen regional autonomy. Concessions on this issue have already been made in the inclusion in the cabinet of leaders of the regional governments, which includes the ministers of defence, justice, public works and industry, tourism and commerce.

The PSOE also faces the task of reorienting Spain towards a closer alliance with the major European powers, Germany and France, without arousing the anger of Washington which saw Aznar as a key ally.

Spain has experienced something of a boom under the PP, largely as a result of massive subsidies from the European Union and its ability to attract international investment from those companies seeking access to the European market alongside cheap labour, subsidies and low taxation. But the accession of ten new countries to the EU in May will strip Spain of these advantages. The new EU members from the east will be competitors with Spain for EU funding and beat it easily on the ability to offer investors low wages and other incentives.

To this end Zapatero has carefully selected his cabinet, which is to be made up of eight men and eight women, a nod towards sexual equality as he had pledged, plus two vice-presidents. It is to be staffed by career politicians, many of whom served in the previous PSOE government of Felipe Gonzalez, that left the political scene in the middle of a financial scandal in 1996. It contains seven trained lawyers, including one judge, six economists and two politics graduates. Several have served posts in the EU both during and after the Gonzalez government and some were responsible for Spain's entry into the Common Market. A couple are experts and held posts in the Middle East.

The most important post in judging the character of the government is its finance minister and chancellor of the exchequer. Initially Zapatero let it be known that he favoured Miguel Sebastian, a top banker and the architect of the PSOE's economic programme. However Sebastian refused the post, preferring to remain an advisor to the prime minister. In his stead Zapatero has chosen Pedro Solbes, whose appointment

emphasises both a commitment to a continuation of the PP's economic agenda and a firmer orientation towards Europe. He is the present EU commissioner for economic affairs and was minister of finance in Felipe Gonzalez's PSOE government until 1996.

In his EU post, Solbes is responsible for the setting up and implementation of the Stability Pact in the European Commission, an agreement to limit budget deficits in countries that are members of the eurozone that requires systematic attacks on welfare budgets and wage levels. He was granted the combined government post of minister of finance and chancellor after demanding total control over economic matters.

Zapatero has already made it known to the business community that he is their man. When the stock market fell soon after the election result was known, due to rumours circulating that the PSOE would evict the PP's supporters appointed as heads of the newly privatised utilities, he immediately rushed to reassure them that all would be business as usual.

The former EU envoy to the Middle East Miguel Angel Moratinos will become foreign minister, while Zapatero has chosen Jose Bono as his defence minister—formerly president of the Castille autonomous government. One of their most important jobs will be to sell whatever deals are stitched up between the US and Europe over Iraq.

During the elections Zapatero made a show of opposing Aznar's alliance with the US, and said that he favoured bringing Spain's 1,300 troops home from Iraq. He has since spent his time making sure that no bridges to Washington are burned and has placed telling caveats on his pledge to withdraw troops, which will only be considered if the United Nations does not take control or "unless there is a proper constitution in place."

Washington intends to officially install its puppet government by June 30 and in so doing declare Iraq's sovereignty has been restored. It is in ongoing negotiations to increase the UN's involvement in the occupation as a means of placating the ambitions of the European powers. For its part the EU has issued a statement insisting that it is "essential" for the UN to play a leading role in the transition to independent government.

Regarding other posts, Jose Antonio Alonso will become interior minister, Jose Montilla Zapatero's minister for industry, commerce and tourism, Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar will be justice minister and Jordi Sevilla is to take on public administration.

Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega, a former secretary of state for justice, will serve as a deputy prime minister and minister for the office of the prime minister. She is the most prominent of the female cabinet members, which also include Elena Salgado as minister for health, Elena Espinosa as minister for agriculture and fishing, Carmen Calvo as culture minister, Maria Jesus Sansegundo as minister for education,

Cristina Narbona as minister for the environment, Magdalena Alvarez as infrastructure minister and Maria Antonia Trujillo as housing minister.

The minister for housing is a new post, meant as a response to the popular anger at the lack of affordable homes.

Zapatero is well aware that he came to power on the back of a significant leftward and progressive movement of millions of working people, who will have no patience with the government if all they see is a continuation of the central thrust of the PP's programme.

A significant feature of Zapatero's pitch for popular support, therefore, is his embrace of liberal social measures that do not impinge on the fundamental interests of the major corporations but which will appeal to the majority of the electorate.

He has pledged to defend the rights of gays, curtail the influence of the Catholic Church in schools and the health service, to create nonpartisan state television and to pass laws against sexist practices in employment and other areas of society. He has declared that the time is ripe for "a secular vision" and "the beginning of complete equality of the sexes, of the unceasing fight against criminal machismo."

Amongst the concrete measures proposed is the withdrawal of an unpopular law introduced by the PP last year, making religious education a compulsory and graded subject, legislation to put gay unions "on the same footing as marriage," and a proposal to change the abortion law to allow women to terminate their pregnancies in the first 12-14 weeks for any reason. Presently abortion is illegal except in cases of rape, a problematic foetus or a proven danger to the mother's mental or physical health.

All opinion polls suggest that the bulk of voters are in favour of these measures, but they will no doubt be met with an organised right-wing backlash led by the PP and the church.



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