

Iraq debacle creates crisis in Portugal

Paul Mitchell
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The decision by the newly elected Spanish government to withdraw its troops from Iraq has created a crisis for the ruling elite in neighbouring Portugal.

The right-wing Social Democratic Party coalition government of Portuguese Prime Minister José Manuel Durão Barroso sent 128 paramilitary Republican National Guard (GNR) to Nasiriyah in southern Iraq last November. Shortly before the contingent arrived, 15 Italian police and soldiers died in a truck bomb blast in the city.

Last month, three of the GNR guards were wounded in an ambush, leading to renewed calls for their recall. In a recent poll, three quarters of Portuguese citizens said the government should bring back the GNR.

Despite public opposition, Durão Barroso has been a fervent supporter of the war, claiming it would be “in the nation’s best interests.” A former leader of the Maoist Communist Party of Portuguese Workers during the 1974 Portuguese revolution, Durão Barroso’s claim to international fame was his appearance on the platform at the Azores summit with Bush, Blair and former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar on the eve of the invasion of Iraq last year.

Durão Barroso represents a section of the Portuguese ruling elite that sees its interest best served by placing themselves under the wing of US imperialism. According to Mario de Queiroz of the Inter Press Service English News Wire, these layers “are nostalgic for Portugal’s imperial past and the epic deeds of the country’s great navigators and wants to paint a rosy reconstruction of the past while highlighting the supposed errors committed by...granting the colonies independence overnight [after the 1974 revolution].”

Serving notice of the ruling elite’s future intentions, Durão Barroso stressed that the experience gained during the GNR mission would be “useful in similar future operations.”

When the new Spanish Prime Minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, announced his decision to withdraw Spain’s 1,400 troops from Iraq, Durão Barroso attacked him for his “dubious policies” and “grey neutralism”—saying they would only encourage terrorism. Durão Barroso said Portugal would not “abdicate from dignity, courage and independence” and he would not withdraw Portugal’s GNR unit.

The opposition Socialist Party opposed the sending of combat troops to Iraq without a United Nations mandate, but agreed to Portugal’s involvement in the subsequent occupation. The party leadership supported the GNR’s original deployment and the appointment of José Lamego—a secretary of state for foreign affairs in the former Socialist Party administration—as the “principal counsellor” of expatriate and immigrant affairs under US proconsul Paul Bremer in Iraq.

When Durão Barroso requested the Socialist Party not to make the demand for the withdrawal of GNR’s “high risk mission...a motive for partisan political conflict,” the current Portuguese president and Socialist Party leader, Jorge Sampaio, said he would agree to the unit remaining in Iraq if the United Nations approves a mandate for the US-led coalition forces by June 30, the date scheduled for the “transfer of sovereignty” in Iraq.

Now that Spain has withdrawn its troops and disaster faces the occupation forces in Iraq, Portugal’s close identification with US imperialism has begun to ring alarm bells in Lisbon.

Durão Barroso has moderated his criticism of Zapatero, saying, “Iraq will not cause a centimetre of difference between Madrid and Lisbon.” This is in recognition of Portugal’s dependence on her bigger neighbour (80 percent of Portugal’s trade is with the European Union, and most of that is with Spain). Durão Barroso also recently met with Zapatero to discuss anti-terrorist measures, including the Portuguese government’s intention to re-impose border controls

for the Euro 2004 soccer games starting in mid-June. Internal Administration Minister António Figueiredo Lopes has also said that Portugal may ask for help from NATO during the championships, as the Greek government has done for the Olympic Games.

Durão Barroso has made use of the Socialist Party's call for more UN involvement to pursue "reform" of the organisation. In an article in the May 7 *International Herald Tribune*, Durão Barroso and co-author Joaquim Chissano, president of Mozambique and president of the African Union, identified "a relative failure of the United Nations system." They suggested, "Many of the conflicts that we are now facing were foreseen and some could have been prevented by appropriate and timely intervention."

Durão Barroso and Chissano called for the UN's main role to become "preventive" action against "failed states," paving the way for the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and UN agencies to run their countries' economies.

The fear that the Portuguese elite has identified too much with US imperialism was most openly expressed last month by Mário Soares, the former Socialist Party president of Portugal from 1986 to 1996 and now a Socialist member of the European Parliament. Praising Zapatero's "courage and intelligence," Soares denounced the Azores summit as a "summit of lies" that "had initiated an anti-European course of subordination to the United States."

He complained that Portugal was in "a profound crisis in which certain elites are at a loss to discern which is the right path to take [whilst] the overwhelming majority of Portuguese feel viscerally the inequality and tragedy of rising unemployment in a society in which the horizon is being obscured."

Soares has hit on a much deeper dilemma for the Portuguese ruling elite. Until the accession of 10 new countries to the European Union on May 1, Portugal was the poorest member of the union. Many of the massive subsidies given to Portugal from EU funds will now be diverted to the new members, or withdrawn altogether. After years of free-market policies carried out by the previous Socialist administration, the country suffered a recession in 2002 and was the first EU country to breach the EU budget deficit target.

Durão Barroso's Social Democratic Party coalition government came into power in 2002 on a programme

to slash corporation tax and public spending and privatise the remaining state-owned corporations and health care. This year, the government will cut corporation tax from 30 to 25 percent and is aiming for 20 percent by 2006. This can only aggravate the situation reported recently in an *Edinburgh Evening News* article describing "a study by a reputable social research team [that] suggested it's likely that one-eighth of Portugal's eight million population is going hungry."



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