

# Spain: PSOE government organises a cover-up over March 11 bombings

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The parliamentary inquiry launched by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero into the terrorist attack in the Spanish capital Madrid that took place on March 11 begins today.

Ten bombs were detonated on four commuter trains traveling into the city, killing 191 people and injuring 1,900. The *Washington Post* June 23 described the commission as “Spain’s version of the US commission investigating the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.” The *New York Times* described it as a “mirror” of the US investigation. This is true inasmuch as both inquiries aim to whitewash the crimes of the guilty within ruling circles.

Friends and relatives of the victims of the bombings are demanding to know if former Prime Minister José María Aznar or current Prime Minister Zapatero, then the opposition leader, received advance warnings of the plot. Both leaders have been accused of knowing far more than they are saying. Maria Culebras, who lost many friends in the bombings, declared, “We here think the same thing happened like in the United States with the twin towers. There were warnings, and it could have been avoided.”

Clara Escribano, who suffered extensive injuries in the attack and is now head of the 11-M Victims Association, urged “that those people who committed mistakes with information, who kept us tricked for a certain period of time be brought to light and pay for their guilt.”

Aznar used the attack to falsely accuse the Basque separatist group ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) of planting the bombs. Even after ETA denied responsibility for the bombings and evidence emerged that the intelligence services were pursuing an Al Qaeda link, Aznar and his spokespersons continued to insist that ETA was responsible. Aznar’s Popular Party (PP) did so out of a well-placed fear that such a revelation would become a focus for the overwhelming opposition to the government’s support for the war in Iraq and a more general opposition to its right-wing economic and social policies.

The parliamentary commission consists of 16 members of parliament from Zapatero’s ruling Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), the PP, the Catalan Republican Left (ERC) and the Canaries Coalition Party. It will begin taking evidence and cross examining witnesses on July 6 and has two months to establish the course of events between the March 11 attack and the parliamentary elections three days later.

A central demand of the Spanish antiwar movement was for

Aznar to be prosecuted for war crimes. It has come to light that soon after the bombings the PP tried to organise a media campaign in support of its denunciation of ETA in order to bolster its support in the imminent general election. This was only halted when editors began to receive contrary information from government and intelligence sources.

In response to revelations that the government was concealing information, demonstrations erupted outside the PP headquarters. Aznar’s plan backfired as the PSOE swept to power in the elections. At the time the PSOE denounced the PP for a cover-up and for using a national tragedy for immediate political gain.

In response to popular opposition, the PSOE withdrew Spanish troops from Iraq within weeks of coming into office, dealing a huge blow to the legitimacy of the US-led occupation. Spanish troops had been stationed near Najaf and were preparing under US command to violently suppress the Iraqi uprising led by the Muslim cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. The consequent loss of life would have inevitably led to a direct confrontation between the working class and the government. The PP had already lied to a hostile population over troop deployment. Aznar initially insisted that any troops sent to Iraq would be non-combat, but they were immediately deployed on patrol and soon engaged in firefights with Iraqi resistance fighters.

Despite claims that the commission of inquiry is a positive exercise in democratic accountability, it is being held in lieu of a genuine independent public inquiry. Zapatero has limited the commission’s remit to an investigation of the alleged “breakdown in communications” between branches of the police and security services that allowed the bombers to “slip through the net.”

There will be no investigation of how the Spanish ruling class saw the war in Iraq as a means to reassert their imperialist ambitions. Nor will it examine how the PP used the atrocity in Madrid to try and deceive the masses into voting for its candidates during the elections.

In the same way that the US commission didn’t use the word “oil” or examine the bloody history of US provocations in the Middle East, the PSOE inquiry has studiously avoided the phrase “Spanish imperialism.” This is because the PSOE are engaged in reshaping Spain’s foreign policy and at the same time attempting to limit the damage to the state apparatus.

Zapatero is attempting to cover up the actions of his predecessors because he has no fundamental disagreement with them on the strategy of promoting Spain’s national self-interest through

military intervention—only with the tactics. Although Zapatero withdrew troops from Iraq, he immediately sought to appease US anger by promising more troops for Afghanistan, doubling their presence to 1,040, and has agreed to send troops to Haiti under United Nations mandates.

Aznar and Zapatero are exempted from testifying to the commission, supposedly out of respect for the “dignity” of their office. Even the right-wing *ABC* newspaper declared that the hearings without Aznar would be like “a game of hide and seek.” The commission’s opening day, where parameters were set and witness lists drawn up, was held behind closed doors. The PP refused to list Zapatero while the PSOE refused to request that Aznar testify. Of the 100 names presented as possible witnesses before the commission, only three former officials were unanimously agreed by all 16 MPs—former Interior Minister Ángel Acebes, the current PSOE Interior Minister José Antonio Alonso and the former chief of the National Intelligence Centre, Jorge Dezcallar.

ERC deputy Joan Puigcercos accused the two main parties of enforcing a “non-aggression pact.” Leaders of the PP can ask for their testimonies to be held in private and their contents to remain unpublished. The PSOE government has all the documents produced by the Spanish National Intelligence Service and will consider on a “case by case” basis whether to release them to the commission. Ministers have slapped a “classified” label on the initial reports of the judicial investigation led by Judge Juan del Olmo.

The PP has been emboldened by the PSOE’s collusion in a cover-up. PP member of the commission Manuel Atencia declared that the commission “would provide an opportunity to prove that the government of the PP always told the truth and never lied.”

Atencia even added that the commission would allow an investigation into allegations that the Socialist Party played a role in organising the demonstrations outside of the PP headquarters prior to the elections. He said that the protests may have been illegal under Spanish electoral law. Atencia could only raise such absurdities because they have been given a new lease of life by the refusal of the PSOE to make public the details of the PP’s conspiracies to undermine democratic rights.

All the political parties involved in the commission are using it for two purposes: to prevent a full-scale public inquiry into the entire Iraq policy of the PP government and how the PSOE adapted to the PP’s criminal intervention from the beginning; and to try to provide the Spanish state with a clean bill of health in front of a sceptical and hostile population.

Paulino Rivero, leader of the Canaries Coalition party and president of the commission of inquiry, gave a telling statement as to the political agenda he hoped would be followed:

“There have been 18 investigatory commissions in the last 25 years, and all of them have been transformed into implements that each party uses against the other... We have to hope that on an issue of such sensitivity, the parties—especially the two large ones—will act responsibly.”

Even before commissioners compiled a witness list, the PP and the PSOE had agreed that no criminal proceedings would be brought against PP ministers regardless of the crimes that maybe

uncovered.

Aznar has tried to absolve himself of any responsibility for the terrorist attack. In his recent book *Eight Years of Government: A Personal View of Spain*, he states that he took responsibility for dropping his guard against Al Qaeda in order to focus his government’s efforts in crushing ETA. According to Aznar, “Spanish public opinion was perhaps not sufficiently aware, until March 11 of the extent of the threat of Islamic terrorism ... The government undoubtedly has to bear a responsibility. Perhaps the very successes achieved in the fight against ETA in recent years led us to lower our guard against the fundamentalist threat.”

In reality there were clear warning signs of a possible Al Qaeda attack on Spain. Articles in the *Washington Times* last month state that reports of threats of a bombing campaign on the Spanish mainland were sent regularly to the PP government because “after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States ... Spain’s support for the Iraqi conflict had heightened the threat.”

The *Washington Post* June 25 reported that the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* “contends that two police informants told their handlers that Middle Easterners in Spain were buying explosives and passed along details about the men and where they lived.”

The Muslim community in Spain has been under constant surveillance ever since the decision was made to support war against Iraq, especially fundamentalists linked with armed groups in Morocco and Algeria. The Spanish press prior to 11 March reported major raids by the police against alleged terrorist cells and the seizure of guns and explosives. Reports were broadcast of imminent terrorist threats on the Spanish mainland.

In January 2004, Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón had sought the extradition to Spain of four detainees from the United States’ prison camp at Guantanamo Bay. To support his case, he produced a 48-page indictment detailing numerous phone calls and meetings as they allegedly set up Al Qaeda and its recruitment operation in Europe. Garzon had been investigating Al Qaeda activity for six years and Spain’s High Court had authorised phone wiretaps in early 2000.

Between the end of 2001 and January 2003, 30 suspected Al Qaeda members had been arrested in Spain, with Aznar claiming that the police had “broken up a major terrorist network ... linked in this case to the Algerian Salafist group, a splinter of the Armed Islamic Group, which has clear connections with the criminal organisation of bin Laden.”



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