

The Madrid bomb inquiry: Aznar continues his lies

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Spain's former prime minister José María Aznar continues to lie about the Madrid commuter train bombings on March 11, which killed 191 people and injured more than 1,700 others.

In an 11-hour appearance on November 29 at the Congressional Commission of Inquiry into the bombings, Aznar declared the main aim of the bombings was to destabilise his Popular Party (PP) government, which lost the general elections three days after the attack. He repeated that the Basque separatist group ETA was involved in the bombings, hoping to justify his bogus claim that he was the victim of an electoral putsch.

Aznar seethed: "It was others who lied... lied and lied obstinately, they perverted the truth and effectively supported a most serious breach of the rules of our democracy."

He accused the Socialist Party (PSOE), radical groups and elements in the media of manipulating public opinion with "aggressive, sectarian, anti-democratic and false claims" in a campaign of "unprecedented harassment" against his government that he said amounted to a coup d'état.

"Any person with common sense ... knows that the intention was to affect the electoral process," he repeated.

During Aznar's appearance at the Commission, Carmen Aguado, whose son Juan Carlos died in the bombings, said: "The spectacle offered up by Aznar is shameful ... We want the truth to be uncovered and for the person who led the government, former ministers and high ranking police officers to face up to their responsibilities."

Aguado added that though Aznar was not "materially responsible" for the attacks, he provoked them "because we were implicated in the war in Iraq".

"If only he could be judged for war crimes at the Tribunal in The Hague," she added, blaming the Congressional Commission for "not letting the truth surface".

When the bombings occurred it was widely rumoured that Aznar's government toyed with the idea of suspending the elections, but after consideration decided to make electioneering capital out of blaming ETA, playing on past successes in exploiting opposition to its terror campaign.

Aznar continued to accuse ETA, even after the organisation vehemently denied responsibility for the bombings and evidence emerged that the intelligence services were pursuing an Al Qaeda link. The PP was anxious that the blame fall on ETA because Aznar portrayed himself as the most determined opponent of its terrorist tactics and the guardian of Spain's territorial integrity. He was also seeking to divert attention from his austerity measures and welfare cuts.

Most important of all was his fear that revelations of an Al Qaeda connection would become a focus for the overwhelming opposition to the government's support for the war in Iraq. The vast majority of the Spanish people—90 percent, according to opinion polls—were opposed to the Iraq war and had demonstrated in their millions against it in 2003.

Within minutes of the bombings, and before any investigation had

begun, PP representatives made numerous public statements declaring that ETA was responsible and instructing Spanish ambassadors to "take every opportunity to confirm ETA's responsibility in these brutal attacks".

Initially, the PP's tactics appeared to work. Political campaigning for the March 14 elections was suspended, and all eyes became focused on the March 12 day of mourning called by the government. Over 10 million people—a third of the Spanish population—took to the streets.

The PSOE helped portray this event as a non-political protest and its leader, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, reportedly told his party to avoid any discussions that suggested the PP was covering up who was really responsible for the bombings.

As the hours passed and more evidence of an Al Qaeda link emerged, however, anger grew toward the PP for its continued insistence that ETA was the prime suspect. Then five men, three of them Moroccans, were arrested, one of whom was accused of connections with a pro-Al Qaeda group. Demonstrations erupted outside the PP headquarters in Madrid and other cities in Spain.

Aznar's plan had backfired and the PSOE became the entirely undeserving beneficiary of the mass hostility felt towards Aznar, sweeping to power in the elections.

It is only thanks to the PSOE that Aznar can make so bold as to use the Congressional Commission as a platform to defend his government. Zapatero set up the commission as a damage limitation exercise. It was held instead of a genuine independent public inquiry into the bombings.

The pro-PSOE *El Pais* newspaper called for a bipartisan agreement over the terms of reference of the commission, similar to the whitewash Washington inquiry into the September 11 bombings. A modicum of truth was needed to calm public unrest, but nothing should threaten the security of the state or Spain's national interests. Indeed the main focus had to be how the state apparatus could be strengthened.

Zapatero therefore 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". The PSOE and PP agreed that Aznar and Zapatero were exempted from testifying, supposedly out of respect for the "dignity" of their office, and that no criminal proceedings would be brought against PP ministers.

Even within such a limited framework, however, problems began to arise. Aznar continued to claim that his government had been unaware of an Al Qaeda threat and that ETA was responsible. In addition, he refused to back down on his claims that he had been ousted by a left-wing conspiracy.

This was completely untenable. In the aftermath of 9/11 the machinery of the Spanish state had been directed to uncover alleged Al Qaeda operations connected to the destruction of the Twin Towers and other planned attacks. Investigative Judge Baltasar Garzon had in fact been investigating Al Qaeda for at least six years. Only a few weeks after the September 11 attack, the Spanish police arrested 11 people in Madrid and Granada and accused them of being part of the Al Qaeda network.

The *Washington Times* reported that the US government regularly sent information about bombing threats on the Spanish mainland 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”.

By the end of 2001 there were 14 suspected Al Qaeda members in Spanish jails, accused of terrorism. In January 2003, Spanish police arrested a further 16 suspected Al Qaeda members in Catalonia. Aznar himself claimed 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.”

In May 2003, Al Qaeda directly threatened Spain for supporting the US war against Iraq and a Spanish restaurant was bombed in Casablanca.

In September 2003, Garzon charged 35 people, including Osama bin Laden, in a 700-page indictment that claimed to show in detail the members, financing and plans of Al Qaeda operatives in Spain and Europe.

Within hours of the Madrid bombings, a van believed to be involved was found containing an audio tape of Koranic verses. The most sensational revelation before the commission opened were internal reports leaked to *El Pais* from Madrid’s Anti-Terrorist Brigade. Aimed at deflecting criticism from the security services, they described how the bombers had been under direct surveillance since February 2003 until it was stopped two weeks before the bombings in order to divert resources to the upcoming royal wedding.

Given all this, to reject out of hand a connection between Islamic militants and the Madrid bombings could only have been motivated by the political imperatives of concealing the consequences of Aznar’s warmongering in Iraq.

Since the commission began on July 6, a string of police and intelligence officials have testified that Al Qaeda and Islamist suspects had been under surveillance for years and their groups infiltrated and that an Al Qaeda connection to the Madrid bombings was understood from the start. Parallel criminal investigations by the police and Judge Juan del Olmo has led to the arrest of over 100 Islamist suspects since March 11.

In September, Aznar himself in an inaugural address as a visiting professor at Georgetown University in Washington DC blamed the Madrid bombings on Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism and even attempted to trace the reason back to resentment felt by radical Muslims at the Catholic “Reconquista” of Spain from the Moors in the 15th-Century.

The right-wing press heaped praise on Aznar for his defence of right-wing interests during his appearance at the commission. *El Mundo* said he was “solid in his defence and incisive in his counterattack” and he had “definitively routed the arguments used by the parliamentary majority out of sectarian obsession or partisan interest.”

Madrid’s *ABC* said: “The former prime minister’s qualities as a brilliant parliamentarian came to the fore yesterday.”

Why is it that Aznar can treat the proceedings of the commission with contempt and perpetuate his lies in the face of overwhelming evidence?

Right-wing forces refuse to accept the setback they have suffered as a result of Aznar’s loss of the election and are intent on mounting a counterattack, particularly as they feel emboldened by Bush’s victory in November’s US presidential election.

Aznar and the PP have also been strengthened by the PSOE’s collusion in a cover-up and its refusal to make public the details of the PP’s conspiracies to undermine democratic rights.

Zapatero’s response to the accusations and insults of Aznar was to insist that at all the time during the March events, he and his party were loyal to the government and offered them every support. The PSOE organisation secretary José Blanco recently repeated that his party had always offered the PP government “total and absolute” loyalty.

Although a central demand of the Spanish antiwar movement was for

Aznar and the PP leadership to be prosecuted for war crimes, Zapatero immediately held out a hand of friendship to his defeated opponents, offering them “collaboration in the affairs of the state”.

It was only because there was widespread opposition to the decision not to call Aznar to testify that the decision was reversed.

Zapatero will also testify before the commission on December 13, but only he says, “with humility and without rancour and what is more looking to the future”.

Through the commission, the PSOE has sought to repair the damage done by the PP to bourgeois rule and bury evidence of how it sought to subvert democratic rights. It has refused to give the commissioners some vital reports such as those containing investigations after March 11 and warnings by foreign intelligence that Al Qaeda was targeting Spain.

A key role in the cover-up carried out by the commission and a left cover for the PSOE is played by the radical parties. Gaspar Llamazares, leader of the Communist Party-dominated coalition Izquierda Unida (United Left) and its spokesman on the commission, pledged himself to a defence of the institutions of the Spanish state. He promised that he would prevent Aznar using his appearance to attack not only “the PSOE government, the opposition parties,” but also “the state security forces and the judiciary”. He said that if Aznar were allowed to do so, this would only “deepen the strategy of destabilising institutions and delegitimising the 14 March election results”.

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 employed. Although he withdrew troops from Iraq, he immediately sought to appease US anger by sending more troops to Afghanistan and Haiti. And following Bush’s re-election, the PSOE government has shown no limits to the grovelling it will do to placate the new administration.

On the domestic front, the PSOE is not departing significantly from the right-wing austerity policies of the Aznar regime and is fully committed to implementing further attacks on jobs and social services. The party’s embrace of the “war on terror” ensures, moreover, that it will continue the attacks on democratic rights.

Aznar’s contempt for the popular will of the Spanish people must sound a warning. The PSOE hoped that Aznar would accept a public reprimand, thereby keeping a lid on the real implications of the March 11 events. But this has come to nothing. The PP and the far right have made clear that they do not accept the legitimacy of the March election and are seeking to overturn its result.



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