

Spain: Popular Party seeks to destabilise Socialist Party government

Paul Stuart**11 January 2005**

In the months since the Spanish people voted José María Aznar's Popular Party (PP) government out of office, its leaders have sought to discredit and destabilise the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government led by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, using the methods of political provocation.

In the election last March 14, the PSOE won 42 percent of the vote against the PP's 38 percent in an historically high turnout of 77.2 percent. The PSOE received 10.9 million votes—the highest number of votes of any party ever—and the PP's vote dropped by 700,000. Support for the PSOE was particularly high amongst young first-time voters.

The vote reflected overwhelming popular opposition to the war in Iraq, which Aznar and the PP supported, lining up with the Bush administration and sending Spanish troops to back the US occupation. Zapatero ran as an opponent of the war, pledging to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq if elected.

The election was held in the heated aftermath of terrorist train bombings in Madrid, which killed 191 and wounded another 1,500. Aznar's attempt to exploit the atrocity backfired, when it became clear that his claim the bombings were the work of Basque separatists was a deliberate deception. Mass demonstrations were held outside the PP's offices on March 13, denouncing both the Iraq war and the government's attempt to deceive the public about the bombings.

The latest threat in the destabilization campaign comes from PP congressional spokesman and former labour minister Eduardo Zaplana. He told an Alicante PP conference last month that because of the PSOE's "parliamentary weakness" and because Zapatero's ministers "have no idea of what they are doing," it is "impossible" for the government to complete its term

of office.

Zaplana urged the delegates to "have the machinery perfectly oiled and be ready to confront the electoral process" because new elections "are going to take place soon, in the spring of 2006 at the latest." He added that "today, with this conference and this team of people, we are taking the first step in order to be prepared."

PSOE spokesmen have made no public or private statements that point to early elections. Quite the opposite. However, only ten months after the PSOE's election victory, Zaplana is avowing that the Socialist Party government will not complete its term of office.

The massive turnout in the March, 2004 election was not only a reaction to the lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction used to justify the war, but also disgust at Aznar's insistence that the Madrid bombers were from the Basque separatist group ETA, when all evidence indicated that Al Qaeda was responsible.

Zaplana was at the forefront of the PP's campaign to blame ETA for the atrocity and organize a cover-up afterwards. After the election, he complained, "We can lose the elections, but under no circumstances will we tolerate being called liars," adding that 24 pages of declassified documents from Spain's National Intelligence Centre would "clear up any doubt about the information the government had in those days." However, it quickly emerged that only two unsigned statements were actually from the intelligence services.

More recently, the Parliamentary Commission investigating the Madrid bombings revealed that Aznar's government had destroyed all its cabinet records from this period. Indeed, it had destroyed the cabinet records from its entire eight-year tenure in office.

Aznar and the PP have never accepted the outcome of the March 14 elections. On July 5, Aznar said,

“Terrorists had achieved their goal in toppling the government.” “It is difficult to recall another day so profoundly anti-democratic as March 13,” he continued. “... Those responsible for the protests are part of the left and they have the worst stains around their necks.”

Aznar continues to turn reality on its head and accuse the then-opposition party and the press of lying and manipulating the elections. “It was others who lied,” Aznar charged, adding that the March 13 demonstrations against his party had constituted “a serious alteration of the laws of the electoral game.” By this he meant that the Spanish masses had intervened in the electoral process in order to oust his government.

In July, the PSOE established a Commission of Inquiry into the conduct of the government in the aftermath of the Madrid bombings. The commission’s remit has been strictly limited to investigating the “breakdown in communications” between different branches of the security services. Zapatero had hoped that, on the basis of the commission’s findings, the PP would accept responsibility for “security failures” and halt its provocations.

The PP, however, rejected the PSOE’s olive branch and treated the proceedings with contempt. Its leaders insisted that none of its officials be prosecuted as a result of the commission’s findings and that they be allowed to testify behind closed doors.

Each party is to publish its own conclusions in February, before an attempt is made to draft some joint recommendations. However, commission Chairman Paulino Rivera has said this may not be possible, due to “irreconcilable differences.”

The PP sought to use the commission to shift attention away from its own illegal activities and attack the PSOE and United Left for the pre-election demonstrations. Zaplana, accused of “uncouth aggressiveness” by Pilar Manjón, spokeswoman of the March 11 Victims Association, has been spearheading the accusations against the PSOE, saying it organised the demonstrations in breach of an electoral law that says all political campaigning must end on the day before the ballot.

The PP threatened to withdraw from the commission unless it investigated the demonstrations. In four hours of questioning by Zaplana at commission hearings, Zapatero vehemently denied any official involvement

by the PSOE. Zaplana refused to accept his denials, saying, “I am sorry to say it this way, but your party behaved in an anti-democratic fashion. You should have at least criticized the rallies and called for them to stop.”

The PP, in a sinister echo of the repression under fascist General Franco between 1939 and 1975, has since demanded that the names, addresses and affiliations of those involved in the demonstrations be brought before the commission.

In its first ten months, the PSOE government has faced a series of provocations organized by right-wing forces which refuse to accept the setback they suffered in the PP electoral defeat. In a recent interview in *El País*, the secretary general of Spain’s Episcopal Conference of Spanish Bishops, with the support of the Vatican, threatened the PSOE with a confrontation if its policies encroached any further on the powers of the Catholic Church. They have sponsored a series of protests against the PSOE’s social policies.

Aznar’s PP maintains that the PSOE election victory was part of a conspiracy involving ETA, Al Qaeda and the PSOE to oust a government dedicated to the defense of Catholic nationalist traditions of conservative Spain. Feeling emboldened by Bush’s victory in November’s US presidential election and the refusal of the PSOE to make public the details of the PP’s destabilisation campaign, Zaplana has given due warning that these forces are preparing a counterattack.



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