

Political tensions rise in Spain

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More than two months since Spain's Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) defence minister, Jose Bono, was violently assaulted on a demonstration, the ruling party is still dragging its feet over whether to pursue a prosecution or congressional investigation into the attack.

On January 22, Bono joined a Madrid demonstration organised by the Association for the Victims of Terror (AVT). Former right-wing Popular Party (PP) Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar is an honorary associate of the AVT, and the 30,000-strong demonstration was effectively a PP event, stridently denouncing PSOE policies on gay rights, abortion and stem cell research, amongst other issues.

The PP has never reconciled itself with the outcome of the March 14, 2004, general election, which saw the Aznar government kicked out of office on a wave of popular hostility towards its participation in the US-led war against Iraq. The PP has denounced the election result as a leftist coup, and has engineered a series of political provocations against the PSOE aimed at destabilising the government.

Nonetheless, the PSOE has repeatedly sought to hold out an olive branch to the PP. It fears that tensions between the two parties will reopen the bitter social and political divisions that remain from the 1936-1939 civil war—tensions that were meant to have been covered over by the “transition to democracy” following the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1976.

Bono has been the most consistent advocate of this policy of “national reconciliation.” Last year, he defended his invitation to veterans of Franco's fascist Blue Division, which fought during the Second World War alongside the Waffen SS in the Soviet Union, to participate in the Columbus Day military parade. He claimed that “if you left out all Spaniards you may not agree with—the Conquistadors, the Carlists and the fascists—you wouldn't have many people left. It's all

Spain.”

The right wing and fascists were not so generous to Bono, however. According to news reports, at the AVT demonstration the government minister was surrounded by a group of “well-heeled” men and women who shouted insults, including that he was a “defender of poofers”—a reference to PSOE plans to enact legal reforms on gay marriage.

As the insults grew increasingly wild and aggressive, someone punched Bono several times and others attempted to strike him with a flagpole. He was eventually rescued from his 20-minute ordeal by police and bodyguards.

After the rally, a group of protesters shouting PP slogans split off and made their way to the offices of the radio station Cadena SER and the PRISA media group, which publishes the pro-PSOE *El Pais* newspaper. They denounced the newspaper for “manipulating” evidence and being part of a conspiracy to oust the Aznar government.

Commenting on the AVT demonstration, the *Financial Times* explained, “The extreme right—an emerging force within the Popular Party—made a show of strength, waving Spanish flags and calling for the unity of Spain.”

The next day, the PSOE ordered a police investigation to identify those involved in the attack. Photographs taken at the demonstration indicated the presence of two PP representatives amongst the group that assaulted Bono. The arrest of the two was immediately denounced by the PP as “unlawful” and “politically” motivated, causing one PSOE minister to complain of the “re-emergence of the political right hidden within the guise of victims' groups.”

Just weeks before the assault on Bono, another incident nearly erupted into violence. On December 29, the PP mayor of the Castilian town of Salamanca, Julian Lanzarote, ordered a metal barricade to be

erected around a military library housing hundreds of thousands of documents seized by Franco's secret police during the civil war. Salamanca was the first major headquarters of General Franco after his fascist uprising in July 1936.

The barricades are Lanzarote's answer to a declaration from Carmen Calvo, PSOE minister of culture, to allow the return to Catalonia of personal and government files stolen at gunpoint during the civil war, which are now housed in Salamanca. In deliberately inflammatory language, Lanzarote pledged, "We are on the alert and we will mobilise because this is a subject that is lodged deep in our hearts.... We will raise the cudgels to prevent this unprecedented cultural villainy."

In reality, it is the defence of Franco's fascist heritage that is "loded deep" in the hearts of the PP, and which is being defended in Salamanca.

The PP has been encouraged on this course by the Bush administration, which denounced the Spanish people for acquiescing to "terrorism" in throwing out the Aznar government.

The thrust of all such assertions is that the results of the March 14 election must be reversed. The PP and its allies seek to foment an aggressive right-wing movement whose initial target is the PSOE government, but whose fundamental hostility is towards the mass movement that brought the PSOE to power.

Throughout its first year in office, the PSOE has responded to the PP's provocations by covering them up or backing off, thereby emboldening the right wing. The PSOE are above all concerned with preventing the masses from once again intervening into political life. To this end, it appears the PSOE is even willing to sacrifice the protection of one of its own senior ministers.



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