

Catholic Church calls for extra-parliamentary opposition to Spanish government

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One of the first acts of the new pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) was to launch an attack on the Spanish social democratic (PSOE) government of Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero.

The Vatican targeted new legislation giving marriage and adoption rights to homosexuals for its main criticisms, although other reforms such as divorce within 90 days of marriage, a liberalised abortion law and the scrapping of religious education as a compulsory option in the curriculum also raised its ire.

Condemnation of the legislation was accompanied by a call for civil disobedience in what can only be interpreted as a campaign to destabilise the government.

The call was made through Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, president of the Pontifical Council of the Family. He gave an interview to the Italian newspaper *Corriere de la Sera* on April 21, the very day Spain's congress approved the new law officially allowing marriage of people of the same sex. This has yet to be ratified by the Senate. The debate is due to take place on June 21 and 22.

The Colombian cardinal declared, "What is being done in Spain, and with a reduced majority at that, is the destruction of the family, brick by brick.... The Church calls urgently for the freedom of conscience and the duty to oppose it (the law) by all those professionals who have anything to do with its application: the same conscientious objection that it is asked of doctors and nurses against such a crime as abortion."

Trujillo reminded Catholics that according to the *Evangelium Vitae*, proclaimed by John Paul II in 1995, "this is not optional, all Christians must be prepared to pay the highest price, including the loss of [their] job."

Cardinal Trujillo then made the following threatening statement: "The Holy See watches with perplexity the evolution of Spain, which it still remembers as a bastion of Catholicism, and which it now sees taking up legislative initiatives considered contrary to the doctrines of the Catholic Church and also to the cultural and religious traditions of the world."

The Vatican's assault on the PSOE government did not start with the new papacy. It began as soon as the Popular Party (PP) was driven from office in March of last year and replaced by the PSOE. Pope John Paul II personally expressed the Vatican's displeasure with the policies announced by the new government. Just days before he went into hospital, he asked a delegation of Spanish prelates, "And what is Zapatero doing? What is the political situation in Spain? What is Zapatero saying?"

John Paul II's criticisms were echoed by the present pope, then Cardinal Ratzinger, who last November referred to the proposed recognition of marriage between homosexuals as "a destructive legalisation," adding his voice to those Roman Catholic leaders who named the socialist cabinet as "laic fundamentalism." Trujillo said that Ratzinger had complained then "how destructive this law would be, which opens the way to dehumanisation."

Back in July 2004, Ratzinger sent a 37-page letter to Spanish Catholic bishops, sanctioned by Pope John Paul II, in which he criticised radical

feminism—what he termed the fight between the sexes—and the defence of homosexuality. The document reiterated the Church's opposition to divorce and to women's equality with men. It also opposes ordination of women priests, which Ratzinger insists is something "exclusively reserved" to men.

Directly addressing the Spanish Senate, the bishops of the Episcopal Congress stated: "Parliament shows itself prepared to approve this new legal definition of marriage, which, as is obvious, will imply a flagrant negation of fundamental anthropological data and an authentic subversion of the most basic moral principles of social order."

They went on to warn that "the law would lack the character of a proper law because it would be in contradiction to reason and moral norms, and that as a consequence of this we remind [them] that Catholics, like all people of upright moral formation, cannot show themselves indecisive or complacent with this norm, but that [they] have to oppose it in a clear and incisive way."

The bishops deemed the law "a step backward in the way of civilisation" and "an unprecedented legal provision gravely harmful to the fundamental rights of marriage, the family, the young and the educators. To oppose immoral provisions contrary to reason is not to go against anybody, but in favour of love of truth and the good of every person."

Relations between the Catholic Church and the Spanish government have never been so poisoned since the conflicts in the 1930s that preceded the civil war of 1936-1939. Carlos García de Andoin, the coordinator of the PSOE's Catholic wing, was moved to warn, "It is always a mistake to treat religion in Spain as a political matter. History shows that to do so results only in violence."

Why has Spain found itself the subject of the Vatican's wrath?

The PSOE's legislation would naturally raise the displeasure of the papacy, but that is not the fundamental reason why efforts are being made that aim ultimately at regime change in Spain.

On March 11, 2004, a terrorist attack blew up several trains in Madrid, causing the death of nearly 200 people and wounding thousands. Three days later, the ruling Popular Party of José María Aznar was ousted in a general election.

The PSOE came to power on the crest of an unprecedented movement in opposition to the invasion of Iraq and the social policies of the PP. The dominant sections of the Spanish bourgeoisie had expected and hoped for the return of the PP to power, so that it could intensify its efforts to impose austerity measures, labour reforms and welfare cuts, as well as the decimation of democratic rights under the mantle of its "war on terror."

But the terrorist attack and the events of the following three days changed all that. The Spanish people had marched in their millions against the Iraq war and continued to oppose Spanish participation in the occupation of the country. They also believed that Aznar's support for the US invasion of Iraq had turned Spain into a potential target for an attack, a fear that was amply borne out by the events of March 11.

The PP government lied about who had perpetrated the outrage,

insisting that it was the work of ETA, the Basque separatist movement, so that it could exploit its record of combating domestic terror in order to win the election. The revelation that the attack on the Madrid trains had indeed been carried out by Al Qaeda or another Islamist fundamentalist group served to reanimate the powerful antiwar sentiments. But fundamental historical issues played a major part, too. When it came out that the PP had sought to cover up what it knew about the bombings in order to shield itself, a common reaction was, “The fascists are at it again!”

This had an electrifying effect on the population. In a matter of hours, thousands of people took to the streets, picketed and jeered the PP headquarters. Tens of thousands who would not normally have gone to the polls—particularly young first-time voters—were mobilised behind the PSOE, which was viewed as the most realistic vehicle for deposing the PP. Other left organisations, such as the Stalinist-dominated United Left (IU), threw their weight behind this tactic at the expense of their own votes.

This was a shocking electoral result that sent shivers down the backs of the right wing all over the world. Their fear was that the example of Spain was going to be followed in the United States with the deposing of the Bush administration, and that the scalps of Tony Blair in Britain and John Howard in Australia might also be taken.

Britain’s *Independent* newspaper made the following comment at the time: “The sudden loss of power for Spain’s ruling Popular Party, which joined Tony Blair in steadfastly supporting George Bush’s ‘war on terror,’ is nothing short of a political earthquake.

“With growing unhappiness over Iraq already eating into Mr. Bush’s lead in the race for re-election, and Mr. Blair facing a crisis of credibility over his justification for the war, the Spanish upset could augur a total change in the political landscape for the three main protagonists in the war to oust Saddam.”

The reaction by the right wing was to go on the offensive and attempt to reverse this trend by launching a campaign to shift politics to the right. In large measure, this focused on moral issues associated with the more fundamentalist strands of Christianity.

In the US, in particular, the campaign for the re-election of Bush concentrated on opposition to gay marriages, abortion, stem-cell research and other so-called “right to life” issues. The same was true in Australia, but to a lesser extent, while in Britain, Blair could rely on the massive unpopularity of the Conservatives to secure re-election. In any event, the threat to the rule of the pro-war triumvirate was beaten back, leaving Aznar as the only political casualty of the mass antiwar movement that had swept the world.

It is this that accounts for the intensity of the right-wing attempts to destabilise and hopefully bring down the PSOE government in Spain. The Vatican is, in fact, only coming to the aid of an ongoing campaign waged by Aznar’s Popular Party, which from day one has attempted to destabilise the PSOE government and create the conditions for its own return to power.

For the first time since the restoration of bourgeois democracy in Spain—again calling to mind the events of the 1930s—the old Francoite right has openly declared that it does not accept the legitimacy of a democratically elected government. The PP has accused the PSOE of being an illegitimate government because, they maintain, it was behind the anti-PP demonstrations outside its headquarters on the eve of polling day. The PSOE has strongly denied these allegations. The PP has also claimed that the PSOE spread lies about how the government had sought to conceal the origins of the terrorist attacks. It maintains that there was and still is every reason to believe that ETA was involved.

The Vatican and the PP are working hand in glove. Several Popular Party mayors have attempted to boycott the implementation of the government’s new social policies. The PP leadership in Catalonia has had to suspend Lluís Caldentey, the mayor of Pontons, a small locality in

Barcelona of 300 inhabitants. In a radio interview, Caldentey stated that marriages between people of the same sex, as well as being immoral, created a “deformed situation, because normally people are born male or female, because I have never seen two male dogs making love.”

Although Spain is often portrayed as an intensely religious country, the reality is that practising Catholics make up only a small minority. The history of the Spanish working class is one of extreme hostility to interventions by the Church in the affairs of the state, in support of the most reactionary policies.

The Vatican is very conscious of the declining influence of the Catholic Church and is particularly keen to win the support of younger forces for its right-wing offensive. To do so, it has made a direct appeal to the Franco generation to more aggressively declare their old allegiances in order to change the political climate in Spain. Archbishop Rodríguez declared, “Catholicism is in Spain’s guts,” but continued, “Unfortunately it is a legacy of Franco that people over 50 aren’t at ease discussing their opinions in public, and those under this age haven’t been properly evangelised.”

Such an “evangelical” mission carried out by the old fascists is made all the more necessary because of the broadly based left-wing sentiment in Spain. The reaction of the Spanish working class in March of last year was more politically conscious and developed than elsewhere in Europe. This was precisely because of the continuing impact on the mass popular consciousness of the struggle between revolution and counterrevolution in the 1930s and the bitter experience of life under fascism, which only ended in 1978.

There is undoubtedly a great deal of confusion over the central lessons of these historic experiences, but they are still manifest in the powerful anti-imperialist sentiment and the determination to defend democratic rights. This found expression in the overwhelming opposition to the Iraq war and became an explosive force when it was revealed that the political heirs of Franco had systematically lied about who had carried out the Madrid outrage in order to stay in power.

If the conspiracy between the church and the right wing were to prove successful in bringing the PP to power, it would be a government far to the right of the one that was deposed in 2004. The Catholic Church is attempting to create an ideological climate based on theocratic issues that will serve as the basis for a revival of a fascist movement.

It must be remembered that the church fully supported Franco’s 36-year dictatorship, during which strikes were illegal and sometimes punished by death. All organisations of the working class were driven underground or destroyed, and no opposition political parties were allowed. Franco eliminated universal suffrage and viewed any criticism of the regime as treason.

Religions other than Catholicism were considered heresy. Education was denied to children who had not been baptised in the Catholic Church. High grades at school were impossible unless pupils attended church every Sunday. People were incarcerated, tortured and often shot in the back of the head and buried in secret mass graves on the word of a priest. The church shared power with the fascist state and blessed Franco’s repressive apparatus.

No confidence should be placed in the ability or willingness of the PSOE to combat the attacks of the Vatican and the PP. It was in every way the undeserving beneficiary of the mass popular opposition to the PP and since coming to power has done everything it can to rehabilitate Aznar and the right and restabilise political and social relations

Zapatero withdrew Spanish troops from Iraq under the pressure of the antiwar movement, but his party is fully committed to the “war on terror,” which demands continuous attacks on democratic rights. It maintains troops in Haiti and other “trouble spots,” has just pledged to send a few hundred more troops to Afghanistan and is prepared to train Iraqi military personnel outside of Iraq. On the domestic front, other than on lifestyle

questions, the PSOE's programme does not significantly differ from the austerity measures of the PP government. It is the main champion of the economic agenda outlined in the proposed European Union constitution, based on the elimination of social provisions and the untrammelled domination of the major corporations.

Bitter historical experiences with both social democracy and Stalinism demonstrate that neither can be relied upon to defend the independent interests of the working class. In the 1930s, they joined a Popular Front with the left bourgeoisie, betraying the revolution and ensuring the victory of Franco. Spanish people paid for this with almost four decades of dictatorship. In the 1970s, they again offered themselves as the main advocates for the so-called "peaceful transition," which once more saved the Spanish bourgeoisie, giving amnesty to the fascists and burying the class issues under the slogan "forget and forgive." Today, they continue to play the same role of concealing the machinations of the extreme right and its allies in Rome and thus paving the way for its return to power.



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