

Spain: The Popular Party begins to fracture

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Spain's right-wing opposition Popular Party (PP) is engulfed in a bitter internal political as today's three-day national conference begins.

The pro-PP *El Mundo* says the atmosphere inside the party resembles "a state of paranoia." According to *ABC*, PP officials are trying to prevent these tensions erupting at the conference and "opening the Pandora box of confrontations in the streets."

The immediate source of the conflict is the PP's two successive general election defeats, in March 2004 and March 2008. More fundamentally, it represents the fracturing of the PP whose architect was the Francoist minister Manuel Fraga and the unravelling of the 1978 constitutional arrangements that were put into place during the "transition to democracy" after Franco's death in 1975.

Just before the March 2007 national elections, the popularity of the ruling Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) had hit a low and commentators anticipated a narrow PP victory. However, the PSOE was re-elected due to popular hostility to the PP's neo-liberal economic policies and its support for the war in Iraq—the same political hostility that brought the PSOE, the undeserving beneficiary of a leftward radicalisation of the working class, into office in March 2004.

The PP reacted to defeat with undisguised fury. Denouncing the new government as illegitimate and the product of a left-wing coup, defeated PP leader José María Aznar and the PP launched a four-year campaign of "confrontation" together with the Catholic Church and sections of the army—involving repeated provocations on the issues of regional autonomy, negotiations with the armed Basque separatist ETA, the PSOE's social policies and in defence of Franco's heritage. In early 2007, Aznar declared that the post-Franco bipartisan compact was "destroyed."

This right-wing offensive saw PSOE politicians violently assaulted, bishops leading right-wing marches, and threats by the military to march on Madrid. This galvanised popular hostility to the PP and assisted the PSOE's re-election. Shortly before the 2008 election, the party's media chief, Gabriel Elorriaga, admitted that the PP had "a very hard, right-wing image at the moment" and that "Even our own voters think they are more centrist than the PP."

Others declared it was impossible to defeat the PSOE based on such a campaign. The founder of *El Mundo*, Pedro José Ramírez, provoked consternation by urging the PP to abandon its hostility to gay marriage, embryo research and negotiations with ETA. The problem, however, is that whilst ditching such positions could secure a temporary electoral advantage, it could also see the PP start to break up by alienating its most hard-line fascist layers.

In the hours following this year's election defeat, the right-wing press led by *El Mundo* turned its fire on Rajoy, whom it felt was too closely identified with the "politics of confrontation." It asked, "Is Rajoy the leader the PP needs to beat Zapatero in 2012? He himself

encouraged doubts last night by avoiding confirmation that he is going to continue at the helm of the party and even suggesting the opposite. The sparse enthusiasm he showed when addressing his followers—honest and conscious as always—feeds speculation."

Instead of resigning, as many expected, Rajoy announced he wanted to stay on as leader in order to take the party to the "political centre." Rajoy's apparent change of direction is tactical. Despite supporting the rightist offensive to destabilise and remove the PSOE, he has also drawn the conclusion, like Elorriaga and Ramírez, that such a campaign had backfired. He has warned that the PP is in danger of becoming a party of "two million voters"—i.e., a fascist hardcore—and that it has "to integrate different ways of seeing things...be able to find the support of 12 or 13 million votes at the next general election."

And at the beginning of June, he insisted again that the PP had to be "in the centre, speak to everyone and not always place itself on a corner" and criticised those who had been publicly challenging his "principles."

On June 17, Madrid Mayor Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón, a close supporter of Rajoy, directed his fire at the fascist right, saying, "The key to our next victory is to ensure that when citizens think about the PP, they think about the future. We have to come up with a project that looks to the future, not one that is trapped in the past."

The most aggressive opponent of Rajoy remaining as PP leader was Ramírez, who made an unprecedented outburst on the Catholic Church's radio station COPE, describing Rajoy as a "spoiled brat who acts with despotic manners," an "inept leader" and a "cannibalistic politician." The notorious COPE radio presenter, Federico Jiménez Losantos, went on air asking for forgiveness for advising his listeners to vote for Rajoy in the general election. Aznar joined the fray, declaring that the PP needed a leadership that didn't have "complexes" about the past.

Ramírez called on PP politicians to "lead an uprising" against the PP leader and made overtures to the likes of PP deputy leader Juan Costa. Costa has said that the generation that grew up in Aznar's shadow is now "ready to take over, with experience, talent and determination," like the PP's shadow minister for foreign affairs, Gustavo de Aristegui, or "someone...from Esperanza Aguirre's team, some youth who believes in the democratic ideals."

Aguirre, president of the Madrid region, is one of the few who have hinted at challenging Rajoy for party leadership. Rajoy responded by implying that Aguirre could always join the Liberal Party.

After the election, in what his opponents saw as a capitulation to the PSOE, Rajoy set about appointing younger members, including the 36-year-old Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría as PP spokesperson in Congress. Santamaría declared that the PP now stood for the "defence of public health and education and an indispensable social coverage." Rajoy offered a front-bench position to Ruiz-Gallardón, an opponent

of Esperanza Aguirre, who said, “Today, I don’t know but in 2012, if we succeed in doing good work many PSOE voters will vote for the PP because the centre is the only political space.”

Since the election defeat, a number of right-wing figures have resigned. On April 29, Eduardo Zaplana, a former minister of employment and social security and the main PP spokesman in Congress, announced his departure, followed a few days later by Ángel Acebes, the minister responsible for Homeland Security and Police when the Madrid bombings occurred. Acebes made repeated public accusations that the bombings were the work of Basque separatist organisation ETA, despite clear evidence that the atrocity was the work of Islamic terrorists.

At the end of May, María San Gil, president of the Basque PP, and José Antonio Ortega Lara (a PP activist and former prison officer kidnapped by ETA in 1996 and held captive for more than a year) also announced their resignations. *Periodical* described the resignations as having an organised character. Both said that Rajoy would capitulate to the moderate nationalist Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) that runs the Basque region and is planning a referendum they claim would be the first step towards separation from Spain.

San Gil has since brought forward the date of the Basque PP regional conference. He immediately received the support of Aznar, who announced that he was “deeply unhappy” about the crisis, and his wife, Ana Botella, who called her a “moral, political and emotional reference point.”

Aznar made his statement on his return from Peru. He is facing serious allegations that the PP, with the CIA, is training and fomenting right-wing movements throughout Latin America. In January 2006, discussing the emergence of populist leaders in South America such as Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez, Aznar told the Chilean newspaper *Mercurio*, “I hope that the populist wave is stopped. Somebody has to do it, somebody has to say that this is not the way. I’m prepared to do it and I know that I have a lot of friends in the area ready to help. So we’re going to see if we can get organised and do it.”

Following the resignation of San Gil and Ortega Lara, a mob gathered outside the PP headquarters hurling insults at Rajoy and calling for his immediate resignation. They shouted, “Rajoy has betrayed my vote”, “Give me my vote back” and “Go now.”

Elorriaga, one of Rajoy’s closest allies, declared, “We have a project, and we have people.... What we need now is renewed, solid and unifying leadership, and this is something which, although it pains me to say it, Mariano Rajoy is not in a position to offer.”

Significantly there have also been denunciations of Manuel Fraga demanding he retire and stop interfering. The *Irish Times* reported at a recent ETA victim’s memorial ceremony in Madrid that a mainly middle class crowd enthusiastically chanted for Aguirre, “Presidente, Presidente,” whilst booing Rajoy and Gallardon and jeering Fraga.

Fraga, one of the most experienced and pragmatic rightist politicians, has been aware, since the collapse of the Franco dictatorship, that for the right-wing to survive it has to develop a more populist appeal and distance itself from its fascist roots. He was minister of information and tourism during the Franco regime between 1962 and 1969, and became interior minister in the first short-lived right-wing government after Franco’s death in 1975. The following year, Fraga helped found the People’s Alliance (AP) and became its president.

Fraga represented a wing of the Francoists that understood the necessity to overhaul the isolated national economic policies that had led to stagnation and decline. After Franco’s death, he thought it

could be done through the apparatus of the fascist state, but that perspective was soon under threat from the revolutionary aspirations of the working class. In 1978, he worked with the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and the PSOE to draw up a new Constitution and effect a “peaceful transition to democracy” that left the fascists untouched and ensured the continuity of bourgeois rule.

In 1989, he helped create the PP out of the ashes of the AP, incorporating self-proclaimed conservatives, liberals, Christian democrats and monarchists. But as one commentator has noted, “few within the PP hierarchy have ever actually revealed their true ideological leanings in public.” As Rajoy now tries to move the PP to the centre, these ideological leanings, hidden for so long, are coming to the surface.

A number of observers compare the present turmoil in the PP with splits and crises in the PA in the early 1980s. There are important parallels—a period of permanent crisis for the fascist right where parties rapidly appeared and disappeared and had no stable political base. But there are significant differences. In 1989, out of the period of crisis, the PP was formed. Fraga managed its factions based on an expanding economy. The present turmoil in the right wing comes as the economic arrangements underpinning this stability are in crisis. The International Monetary Fund has warned Spain that it will be one of the hardest hit by the mounting world economic crisis.

The more-farsighted PSOE politicians are deeply troubled by the escalating tensions in the PP and correctly fear that it is a further escalation in the collapse of the political arrangements established in the transition. The PSOE is aware that political tensions are tearing apart other political tendencies that were signatories to the 1978 constitutional arrangements, most notably the former coalition partner of the PSOE, the United Left (IU), made up of remnants of the Communist Party, whose vote in the March elections slumped.

Over the last four years, Zapatero has sought to encourage Rajoy’s move to the “centre” and separate him from the extreme right, whilst arguing with the far right to reengage with the “democratic” process to prevent such a public conflict. Zapatero and Rajoy are working hard to prevent the present conflicts escalating into a full-blown crisis of rule, resulting in an open conflict with a radicalised and combative working class. As popular hostility to the PP grows and an economic crisis is worsening by the day, the entire project of the transition is falling apart.



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