

Spain: Popular Party right-wing rejects “turn to the centre”

Paul Stuart, Paul Mitchell
5 July 2008

The right-wing of Spain’s Popular Party (PP) has rejected the “turn to the centre” endorsed at the June 20-22 party conference in Valencia. A significant and influential section of the party, grouped around president of the Madrid region, Esperanza Aguirre, and backed by former PP Prime Minister José María Aznar, has launched a struggle to undermine the decision and unseat Mariano Rajoy who was re-elected PP leader by conference delegates. The conservative paper *El Mundo* described the period leading up to the conference as “the darkest 100 days in Popular Party history.”

The “turn to the centre”—an attempt to focus attacks on government economic incompetence—has been orchestrated by sections of the PP led by Rajoy, the party’s founder and former Francoist minister, Manuel Fraga, and the founder of *El Mundo*, Pedro José Ramírez, who turned against the party’s four-year long campaign of “confrontation” with the ruling Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE). They are focusing on softening their far-right image, whilst urging business leaders that only the PP can lead a frontal assault on the social conditions of the working class.

The PP initiated a full-frontal and overtly rightist offensive against the PSOE, together with the Vatican and sections of the military officer caste, soon after the Aznar government was brought down in March 2004 due to popular hostility to its support for the war in Iraq and neo-liberal economic policies. The new PSOE government was denounced as “illegitimate”, the product of a leftist coup, and repeated provocations were launched to unseat it from power. However, the campaign backfired and only served to galvanise popular hostility to the PP, alienate many of its own supporters and assist the PSOE’s re-election earlier this year.

Many on the far-right had expected Rajoy, who had led the party during the campaign of confrontation, to resign following his second electoral defeat. Instead he announced he wanted to stay on as leader in order to take the party to the “political centre”. In what his opponents saw as a capitulation to the PSOE, Rajoy set about appointing younger members to his front bench, including the 36-year-old Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría as PP spokesperson in Congress and Madrid city mayor Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón, an opponent of Esperanza Aguirre.

Since the election defeat, a number of Aznarist figures have resigned including Eduardo Zaplana, a former minister of employment and social security and the main PP spokesman in Congress, and Ángel Acebes, the minister responsible for Homeland Security and Police when the Madrid bombings occurred. Acebes was the mouthpiece for Aznar’s claims that the PSOE government came to power through a conspiracy with terrorists.

María San Gil, president of the Basque PP, and José Antonio Ortega

Lara (a PP activist and former prison officer kidnapped by the Basque separatist group ETA in 1996 and held captive for more than a year) also resigned after Rajoy defended pacts with the nationalists from the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and the Catalan CiU to form a parliamentary majority. The PNV is planning a referendum on autonomy in October that the right denounces as the first step towards separation from Spain. In PP heartlands such as the Canary Islands, they face challenges from separatist movements.

At the conference Rajoy appealed for party and national unity, echoing the speeches of Zapatero and José Bono who directed the PSOE’s election campaign, declaring, “That is what I want—a party that serves all of Spain.”

He attacked the party’s fascist hardcore saying, “We need to widen our pool of votes... The PP wants to be the meeting place for the majority of Spanish society. We want an open party, not an exclusive club.”

Rajoy’s shift to the centre is an attempt to popularise a deeply unpopular economic strategy. He is holding himself up as the man who can break with what he describes as the PSOE’s profligate spending policies and to lead an assault on the jobs and wages and conditions of the working class.

Rajoy later said in an interview on *Onda Cero* radio, “We’re in a new situation in which Aznar is no longer in politics. Spain has changed, so has the PP and the problems that are on the table now are not the same as when we were in power.”

Rajoy described the PP as a party of “honorable and efficient managers” and said he needed all of them in the fight against the PSOE, that was according to him incapable of dealing with the economic crisis. Rajoy hopes that the population forgets the Aznar years and his central part in it between 1996-2004, which were responsible for an unprecedented growth of social inequality and which saw the government support the Iraq war and attempt to officially redefine Franco as a great national leader.

Rajoy only received the support of 72.2 percent of the 3,025 conference delegates, making him the least popular PP leader ever and well below the 91.5 percent received by Aznar when he stood for re-election in 1996. As a result of the vote Rajoy is also the official PP candidate for prime minister at the next general election in 2012. An ABC opinion poll revealed that whilst most delegates thought the conference had strengthened Rajoy, 70 percent believed that the faction around Aznar will resume their campaign but this time their energies will be directed toward unseating Rajoy.

The deputy mayor of Madrid, Manuel Cobo, has warned that some in the party are just looking to destroy Rajoy. “We know that they are waiting for us to make a mistake, any mistake, to pounce. But it’s

clear that they are less than 20 percent [of the party] and the current climate, with the economic crisis, favours us,” stated one Rajoy ally. The same source declared in an interview with *20 minutos* that those inside and outside the party who supported Aguirre as leader of the PP are now turning their anger, at the failure of their favored candidate to stand, towards an effort to destroy the Rajoy leadership.

According to reports Aznar arrived half an hour after the conference and started disrupting proceedings, strutting about the stage and soaking up a standing ovation. He warmly embraced his allies such as outgoing general secretary, Ángel Acebes. Rajoy has replaced Acebes with the PP leader in Castilla La Mancha, María Dolores de Cospedal, a 42-year-old divorced mother of a child conceived through in-vitro fertilisation and who supported the “fast-track” divorce law proposed by Zapatero. With this appointment, Rajoy hoped to persuade the population he was engaged in a fundamental breach with the Aznar years.

At the conference Aznar virtually ignored Rajoy and the limp handshake he gave him was interpreted by one right-wing web site *ThinkSpain* as “so disrespectful that it can only have been a deliberate attempt to undermine him.” However, “it was more of a greeting than he gave fellow honorary president and one of the parties’s founding members, Manuel Fraga—who has been championing Mr Rajoy’s reform programme—whom Mr Aznar ignored completely. The visible rift between Rajoy and Aznar underscored the tensions within the PP.”

Aznar left before Rajoy’s speech and after he warned the party not to alienate its traditional voters. “We will not win if we think we can ignore those who already vote for us,” Aznar said, “because no one owns votes, and neither do we.”

He continued, “I have never understood, and I still do not understand, this idea of the centre as the impossible end to an interminable journey. We must not be ashamed of anything, we must be the party that pleases the majority of Spaniards, not our opponents.”

Esperanza Aguirre (the Countess of Murillo) complained that her recommendations for key posts were ignored in favour of other, less confrontational members of her team. She told the conference that she was “a forgotten verse of a poem”, later correcting herself, adding she was a verse in rhyme with the immense majority of PP voters. *El Mundo* says the most repeated phrase from Aguirre since the party conference has been, “It’s not going to stay like this”.

Prior to the conference Aguirre had tried to present a more liberal face to her free-market agenda, meeting gays and transsexuals and urging the PP to withdraw its constitutional challenge to gay marriage whilst declaring that the legislation should withdraw the term “marriage” so as not to attack the Catholic Church.

According to a June 28 editorial in the pro-PSOE *El Pais*, Aguirre has used her power-base in the Madrid region “as a showcase of the right and a nest of counter-power.” She has been applying the doctrine of “ultraliberal” economics “according to which the ills of the nation will be cured by lowering taxes and privatising public services (except the regional public television channel Telemadrid, which her party controls and blatantly uses for party propaganda).”

Aguirre has reduced the number of department heads in the Madrid region from fifteen to twelve. Two of those losing their posts in a “cost cutting” exercise by Aguirre are the deputy premier, Alfredo Prada, and the head of transport, Manuel Lamela, who have both been included by Rajoy in his new team. On July 2, Aguirre told *El Mundo* that the majority of PP voters are upset with what she called “the

permanent journey to the centre”. Immediately after the conference on June 24, Aguirre imposed a two percent pay freeze on local government workers.

In Catalonia Rajoy imposed the candidate Sánchez-Camacho as president of the party after the resignation of Daniel Sirera and a collapse in support for the PP in the region. Rajoy imposed his ally in order to avoid giving the far-right a focus for its campaign to remove him from his post. A further example of the seething tensions in the PP is the recent court case involving the presenter on the Catholic Church’s COPE radio station, Federico Jiménez Losantos, who has been fined €36,000 for accusing the mayor of Madrid city and rival of Aguirre, Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón, of indifference toward those killed or injured in the Madrid train bombings and “manipulated the judiciary” during the court case.

The PP’s “move to the centre” is also provoking a confrontation with its most hard-line fascist layers who constitute the majority of the active rank-and-file cadre of the PP.

It represents the fracturing of the PP and the further unraveling of the political relations established through the 1978 constitutional arrangements that were put into place during the “transition to democracy” after Franco’s death in 1975.

The PSOE is not immune from the general political crisis facing all the parties who stabilised bourgeois rule following the death of Franco. In 2007 the PSOE downplayed a split in its own ranks. Rosa Díez González, a former Member of the European Parliament for the PSOE, gave up her seat and left the party, subsequently founding the UPyD (Union, Progress and Democracy party). In 2008, she was elected to the Congress of Deputies (Spain) representing Madrid district, having embraced the ideological positions of the PP.

PSOE sources have said that Zapatero is planning to change around half of the main leadership posts. This unprecedented restructuring of government is the outcome of a rapid decline in public support as it prepared for its own congress now underway. Despite a series of palliatives, Zapatero has been forced to admit publicly the severity of the economic downturn while still asserting that terms such as “crisis” and “recession” are a matter of opinion. Zapatero had claimed that Spain’s huge surpluses over the last decade meant the economy was in a better position than most to withstand the global crisis. But 80 percent of that surplus has now been spent and the economy is in free-fall.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact