

WikiLeaks cables: Spanish socialist government plans to renege on election pledges

Paul Mitchell
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Cables from the US Madrid Embassy published on WikiLeaks shows that José Luis Zapatero's Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) did not expect to win the March 14, 2004 election, in which it pledged to withdraw troops from Iraq and opposed the previous Popular Party (PP) government's economic policies. Within hours of coming to power, the PSOE was seeking to renege on its manifesto pledges.

The cables confirm the analysis made by the *World Socialist Web Site* that the PSOE was the undeserved beneficiary of the hostility to José María Alfredo Aznar's PP government. It was elected as a result of a surge of popular anger over the PP's lies, which sought to blame the Basque separatist ETA for the March 11, 2004 terror bombs in Madrid and conceal evidence linking Islamist groups to the atrocity.

The PP did so out of a well-founded fear that the truth would become a focus for the overwhelming opposition to Aznar's support for the US-led war of aggression against Iraq, and a more general opposition to the government's right wing economic and social agenda. Opinion polls at the time regularly showed that more than 90 percent of the population was opposed to Spain's participation in the Iraq occupation. Millions took part in demonstrations across the country.

But the election win created major problems for the PSOE, which was committed to carrying out the bidding of big business under conditions where the majority of Spaniards were demanding a major shift in economic, social and foreign policy to the left.

The cables reveal that shortly after the election result, the US Ambassador in Madrid George Argyros wrote that the PSOE "was shocked that they won the elections" and was "scrambling to figure out what to

do." Zapatero had "made a number of campaign statements that might have come out differently had he thought he had a real chance of becoming president of the government of Spain."

"We have already seen some 'wiggle room' in public statements on certain issues, including possibly on the pull out of Spanish troops from Iraq," the cable continues.

On the economy, "Close associates of Zapatero have been careful to say that the incoming PSOE government will not make significant changes to the PP's successful economic policies. Some business leaders have voiced the same expectations with us."

Argyros notes that opposition to the Iraq war had been "central to Zapatero's appeal to voters" and that the PSOE leader was "likely to be a difficult but manageable interlocutor and carries with him the Spanish Left's skepticism of U.S. motives." But he was confident that it could protect US national interests. "We have long-term interests in Spain that transcend governments in power," he wrote.

Particular emphasis was placed on cultivating Zapatero's likely Foreign Minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, who was only too eager to be of service. Argyros had a "cordial" discussion on March 22 with Moratinos, during which the PSOE's obsequiousness was well-received. The cables show that "Moratinos stressed Zapatero's appreciation for the [US] President's phone call after the March 14 Spanish elections. Moratinos was also grateful for Secretary [of State Colin] Powell's phone call to him on Friday, March 18."

Moratinos told Argyros, "We intend to work on the

basis of no change in our bilateral relations from the PP government,” adding that “the Spanish relationship with the US would be his government’s high priority.”

Moratinos and Argyros agreed on “the importance of avoiding setting US-Spanish relations through rhetoric and the need for private dialogue and meetings.” When Argyros asked that commentary on the US elections be avoided, Moratinos said that, “the PSOE, including Zapatero, understood this...He said that there would be no more commentary from Zapatero or the PSOE on the US elections.”

In return, Moratinos pleaded for Washington to moderate US media reports suggesting that the PSOE was only in power thanks to Al Qaeda. On March 11—three days before the election—Islamists had bombed Madrid’s Atocha station, leaving 191 dead and nearly 2,000 wounded. “This is a red line for us, which we cannot accept,” Moratinos said, and asked for US government help “in dispelling this image”.

Four days after the election, on March 18, Moratinos was writing in the *Wall Street Journal* that a United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) could provide the excuse for Spanish troops to remain in Iraq. According to the cables, “Foreign Minister designate Moratinos has been in the lead in holding up the possibility that a new UNSCR giving the UN the leading role in the Iraq could satisfy Zapatero’s electoral pledge. If France and Germany are on board, Zapatero will feel pressure to follow suit.”

Elsewhere, the cables reveal: “One prominent commentator, well connected in the PSOE, noted to us that if, for example, France were willing to commit troops to Iraq under a new UNSCR, Zapatero would be able to show that the situation had fundamentally changed and keep Spanish troops there.”

In a revealing aside, the cables point to the important role the Prisa media empire—owners of *El Pais*, the newspaper most closely aligned to the PSOE—could be called on to play. “In this case, Zapatero’s allies in the all important Prisa media group might be able to help him sell the line that he had won by successfully pushing for an increased UN role and give him cover to keep the troops in. Zapatero may also be susceptible to the argument that, whatever the rationale or lack thereof for the war, undercutting the coalition now could prove disastrous. Nonetheless, escalation of fighting in Southern Iraq, particularly if Spanish forces

suffer significant losses, may clinch the decision in favor of withdrawal.”

During his meeting with Argyros, Moratinos stressed that the PSOE knew the US preferred Spanish troops remaining in Iraq. But, he said, “Let’s talk together” about how the US and Spain could achieve democracy and stability there, “with or without” Spanish troops. The US, Moratinos said, “has a great role to play in this...We are not going to put our finger in your eye”. He then informed Argyros that the PSOE government was thinking of increasing Spanish involvement in Afghanistan to “make clear” that it would not appease terrorism.

In the event, a new UNSCR was not forthcoming, and Zapatero was forced to withdraw Spanish forces. But, not long afterwards, he tripled Spain’s military commitment in Afghanistan to 540 soldiers.



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