

Why the Spanish government lost

By Diego Hidalgo,
Created 2004-03-15 00:00

The 11 March attacks in Madrid have left Spaniards with feelings of shock, disbelief, outrage and dismay that anybody could be so inhuman. They have also heightened the need to uphold and defend society against terrorism, as well as to deal with the threats that over-reactions to such tragedies pose for democracy.

In addition, it is recognised that this is the first, unfortunately it is unlikely to be the last, major terrorist action against Europe. We will have to deal with this issue over the coming days.

Spain's ruling *Partido Popular*(PP) which supported George W. Bush in the Iraq war has suffered a stunning defeat. The Socialist Party (PSOE), which vehemently opposed the war and the Spanish government's position, has gained a totally unexpected victory.

On the eve of the 11 March attacks most polls were predicting an absolute majority in parliament for the PP. It is ironic that the terrorists not only spread blood, death and consternation, but also have contributed to changing the perceptions of voters and expelling from power the government that supported the Iraq war.

It is now clear why this happened. For Spanish voters, there were two reasons to "punish" the ruling party. The first reason had to do with being brutally reminded of the Spanish prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar's stubborn support of an unjustified war against the wishes of over 90% of the Spanish population, and the evidence that this support had placed Spain among the priority targets of international terrorism.

But there is a second, and to my mind more important reason why the Spanish electorate swung so decisively against the ruling party. This relates to the clumsiness with which the ministries of foreign affairs and the interior handled the release of information about responsibility for the terrorist attacks. Against most indications – not least from the Spanish intelligence services – the government insisted that the Basque extremist group ETA was responsible. This interpretation favoured the PP because of the government's tough stance against ETA, and would not invoke memories of the ill-conceived support for Bush and the war.

This view simply was not consistent with the evidence available within twenty-four hours of the attacks. Even then it was possible to identify five major reasons why ETA was *unlikely* to have been responsible:

- After seeing the map of the attacks and what it took to prepare and execute them, it was clear that ETA alone does not have the needed infrastructure
- The chosen date, 11 March, was coincidental with 11 September 2001

- ETA usually acknowledges attacks or makes token warnings about bombs before they explode
- The terrorists were clearly aiming at even more devastating effects (had the trains' schedule gone according to plans, two or more trains would have exploded inside the Atocha station, blowing it apart and killing two or three thousand people), which is much more typical of al-Qaida but does not correspond to ETA's historical actions
- The attacks, whose victims were mostly working class, students, mothers and children, did not benefit ETA - and, although the group has perpetrated attacks against its own interests before, these were decided by isolated terrorists out of control, and not in an operation involving the whole organisation.

Thus, both the attacks themselves and the government's response to them aroused and mobilised the electorate. In the face of terrorism we need to preserve the society that we want for ourselves and future generations. Participation – reported to be 77% nationally – was much higher than expected, and the additional voters were people who usually abstain and now felt compelled to punish the government.

A very important lesson for any government is the need not only to be fair in disclosing information, but also to be *seen* to be fair. The Spanish government's insistence on ETA's responsibility for the 11 March atrocity was perceived as misleading, self-serving and devious by many people.

In this age of rapid communications nothing can be concealed. The government probably did not want to mislead but gave the wrong impression to too many people.

Imagine Britain's electorate ousting Tony Blair from office on the grounds of his having abetted the Iraqi adventure. This is what has happened in Spain on 14 March. The Aznar government was efficient, achieved impressive economic results, brought Spain to the forefront of the European Union, and on the day of the attacks was set to win the elections by a landslide. All that went for naught. Indignation over the way responsibility for the attacks was presented went against the government. One wonders if President Bush has taken notice.

For, in my view, and that of many Europeans, the really vital elections for all of us will take place on 2 November 2004 in the United States. These are presidential and legislative elections in which we cannot participate or vote.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-madridprevention/article_1790.jsp



Copyright © Diego Hidalgo, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.