

A victory for Spain, not al-Qaida

By Ivan Briscoe,
Created 2004-03-18 00:00

The electoral victory of Spain's *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), three days after the devastating train bombings in central Madrid [1] that killed over 200 citizens, was astounding. But its relatively brief and subdued celebrations reflect a key political reality: both internally and internationally, the party has taken power in an emotionally fraught environment.

Here in Spain, the public mood remains dominated by the grief, fear and anger generated by the "11-M" bomb attacks; only the anger appears to have been assuaged by José María Aznar's exit. From the United States and Britain – the leading advocates of war-led "regime change" in Iraq, along with Aznar's Spain itself – has come biting criticism of Spain's electorate and its new leaders [2].

There, influential voices accuse José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's [3] party of rising to power on al-Qaida's coat-tails, and preparing to return the favour by withdrawing Spanish troops from Iraq unless a formal UN mandate over the country is declared before the transfer of power to Iraqi authorities at the end of June 2004.

More on Madrid in openDemocracy:

- Richard Torné [3] on democracy after atrocity
- Diego Hidalgo [3] on politics and trust
- Mary Kaldor [3] on how not to fight terror
- Paul Rogers [3] on Europeans as targets
- Marie-Claude Souhaid [3] on a democratic answer
- Cristina Mateos, Reinhard Hesse, José Luis Herrero, and Maryam Maruf

More widely, these voices ignore or dismiss essential Spanish political realities as mere interference with the “real” contest: between free states and fundamentalist terrorists. In this light, Spain’s people are charged with unwittingly betraying the “coalition of the willing”, weakening the west and giving al-Qaida precisely what it wants.

The argument has been propounded, with singular venom, by military analysts and political commentators in conservative media outlets, from the *Wall Street Journal* [4] and the *Daily Telegraph* [5] to Fox News). Off-the-record remarks by leaders of Spain’s outgoing *Partido Popular* (PP) confirm that it could soon be strategically deployed in domestic politics.

Its tenets are simple, superficially persuasive, and potentially toxic – not just to Spain, but to any country that might follow its political path. Before Thursday, the story goes, the PP and its leader Mariano Rajoy were on course for a narrow victory over the PSOE, headed by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. As it turned out, the latter won by a clean five points. In between lay a swing caused by the most lethal terrorist attack in modern Spanish and European history [5].

If accepted, this narrative would drain legitimacy from Zapatero’s government and inaugurate four years of domestic political warfare; in the international sphere, Spain could (if George W. Bush wins another term) see itself classed as another proto-French pariah, relegated from “new” to “old” Europe by an electorate shocked by terror into appeasement.

Anglo-American illusions, Spanish realities

The “al-Qaida victory” argument [6] is quick, easy, and profoundly wrong – for four reasons. The first and most obvious is the nature of the decisive switch that occurred in millions of Spanish minds between Thursday 11 March and Sunday 14 March. During this period, grief at Thursday’s horror was compounded by anger at their government’s manipulation of information over the next two days – an approach premised on blaming the Basque militant group ETA [6] until polling day and reaping the rewards afterwards.

As the truth leaked out that an Islamist offshoot of al-Qaida was the likely culprit, Aznar and his minions raised their pitch: the prime minister personally telephoned the editor of the newspaper *El País* twice on the day of the attacks to instruct him as to ETA’s guilt; his ministers berated dissenting voices; Spain’s foreign minister, Ana Palacio, circulated a message to all the country’s ambassadors [7] ordering them to blame the Basques; television news slavishly followed the “line”. Even after the first Moroccan and Indian suspects had been arrested, the state-run TVE-1 made an unannounced change to its Saturday night schedule, slipping in a film about the murder of a politician by Basque terrorists. Meanwhile, the victims kept on dying.

But this apparatus of newspapers and state-run channels, built up over the eight years of the Aznar government’s life and so effective in delivering loyal communication, could not contain the information stampede – of horrors in Atocha station, letters in Arabic from London, denials from the Basque country. José María Aznar, the scourge [8] of terror groups – whether Basque, Arab or Colombian – was ending his days in office having multiplied the conflicts on Spanish soil; in covering this up, he only succeeded in drawing attention to his failures, and to his system of media control. His punishment, and that of his successor Mariano Rajoy [9] (whose campaign vision was of a “calm Spain where there is no fury”), is an inspiring example of democratic sanction for assurances betrayed and promises broken.

The second reason to reject the instant interpretation of the election result relates to the fact that the Spanish public has never viewed the war on Iraq as a legitimate part of the “war on terror” and thus cannot be accused of inconsistency (opposition to the Iraq war and the subsequent occupation has remained at around 90% [9]). Indeed, it seems that the attacks prompted relatively few Spaniards actually to change their voting preference. Rather, they galvanised turnout [10] (particularly among young people) to an impressive 77%, ended the campaign’s soporific atmosphere, and transformed the saddest election Spain has ever known into a genuine, moving act of democratic affirmation.

The third reason to reject the “al-Qaida victory” theory refers to the honourable tradition that already exists in Washington of strategic withdrawal in the name of mollifying terrorists. Donald Rumsfeld himself, after all, presided over the final retreat of US troops from Saudi Arabia – one of the main rallying calls of al-Qaida in the 1990s [10] – shortly after the end of “major combat operations” in Iraq.

Neither in Washington nor Madrid is there any intention of negotiating with terrorists, but strategic shifts to sap the Islamist cause are a valid part of the battle. In this light, there is no sense whatever that Spanish people are any less committed to opposing the threats posed by terrorism than are Americans.

This, in turn, leads to a critical fourth reason – the distraction Iraq represents from the real “war on terror”. By Saturday night, the first arrests in the bombing investigation had been made in Lavapiés [11], a multicultural neighbourhood close to the centre of Madrid. Police have since established that the six prime suspects – including mobile-phone retailer Jamil Zougam, who remains under arrest – are all from the northern Moroccan cities of Tangiers and Tetouan. The dynamite came from Burgos [12], northern Spain; the detonators were also Spanish. This evidence suggests that the contribution of the Iraq war to fighting terror has been wholly negative: terror has emerged within the west or on its doorstep, Iraq has served only to distract attention and stimulate the sleeping cells.

The *real* victory

In short, the election was in no way a “resounding victory” for al-Qaida, as Martin Wolf branded it in the *Financial Times* (“The world must unite against terrorism”, 17 March 2004) – far less (in Douglas Murray’s highly-coloured formulation [12]) Spaniards’ gift of “the dignity of all their land to a group of fascists”.

Spain’s people, it is worth recalling when faced with such careless rhetoric, know what it means to fight fascism. They unanimously loathe the terrorists who have inflicted such suffering on them; the bombing of a train in Pozo del Tío Raimundo, a neighbourhood famed for its working-class resistance to Franco, has quashed the last vestiges of any left-wing romanticism about “Arab combatants”. Nor is the PSOE weak on terror, indeed the party is still associated by many Spaniards with the GAL [13] death-squads that toured the Basque country in the 1980s to devastating effect.

The PSOE, in short, was not elected to appease, nor is theirs a mandate from Osama bin Laden. Its task, instead, will be to repair a war on terror that through vast media manipulation and conceptual confusions has become synonymous with a project of empire, territorial occupation and unnecessary violence. Its immediate objectives are clear: restoring the ties with Morocco that Aznar has destroyed; improving pan-European police and judicial cooperation; and perhaps most importantly, integrating large Muslim communities that are currently marginalised [14], both to weaken the pull of fundamentalism and secure better sources of intelligence.

This is the true mandate that the Spanish people have given José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero – to reorientate the fight against terror away from the “category mistake” espoused by Bush, and towards treating al-Qaida not as a rogue state but as an ideological serial killer. In this, out of the catastrophe of Madrid they may lead Europe to the realisation that al-Qaida’s *real* victory would be an assault on reason and liberty caused by the militarisation and securitisation of democratic politics.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-madridprevention/article_1795.jsp

Links:

- [1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_11,_2004_Madrid_attacks target=_blank
- [2] <http://www.salon.com/politics/wire/2004/03/17/hastert/> target=_blank
- [3] <http://www.euractiv.com/cgi-bin/cgint.exe?204&OIDN=2500012&-home=home> target=_blank
- [4] <http://www.opinionjournal.com/best/?id=110004823> target=_blank
- [5] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2004/03/17/dl1702.xml&sSheet=/opinion/2004/03/17/ixoplead.html> target=_blank
- [6] <http://www.nationalreview.com/frum/diary031604.asp> target=_blank
- [7] http://www.inq7.net/wnw/2004/mar/14/wnw_2-2.htm target=_blank
- [8] <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1095782/posts> target=_blank
- [9] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3201363.stm> target=_blank
- [10] <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,601306,00.html> target=_blank
- [11] <http://www.sindominio.net/fiambrera/lavafeet1.html> target=_blank
- [12] http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2004-03/17/content_1370688.htm target=_blank
- [13] <http://www.yale.edu/yup/books/097506.htm> target=_blank
- [14] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/TPStory/LAC/20040317/SPAINMUSLIMS17/TPInternational/Europe> target=_blank



This article is published by Ivan Briscoe, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.