

Spain's 11-M and the right's revenge

By Mariano Aguirre,
Created 2006-03-10 00:00

Two years after the 11 March 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid [1] that killed 191 people and injured around 1,900, Spain lives in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, most citizens have absorbed in a peaceful, non-vengeful way the overwhelming evidence that a transnational, radical Islamist network had targeted Madrid on that terrible day. On the other hand, a group of politicians, journalists and demagogues have attempted to poison the public mind by spreading paranoid conspiracy theories. As a result, the social coherence that the terrorists were not able to destroy is now under siege by some political actors who have not accepted the decision of the Spanish people to vote José Maria Aznar's rightwing government out of office three days after the attacks [2].

openDemocracy writers debate [3] the Madrid bombs and their aftermath:

Diego Hidalgo, "Why the Spanish government lost [3]" (March 2004)

Diego Muro, "ETA after Madrid: the beginning of the end? [3]" (March 2004)

"Terrorism, democracy and Muslims after the Madrid bombs [3]" (March 2004) – a discussion involving Timothy Garton Ash, Maï Ghoussoub, Stephane Gompertz, Diego Hidalgo, Isabel Hilton, Kirsty Hughes, John Lloyd, and Matthias Matussek

Fred Halliday, "Terrorism in historical perspective [3]"
(April 2004)

Fred Halliday, "Terrorism and its consequences: a tale of three cities [3]"
(March 2005)

Peter R Neumann, "Madrid, London, and beyond: don't reinvent the wheel [3]" (July 2005)

A few hours after "11-M", the then Spanish government knew that it was highly unlikely that the Basque terrorist group *Euzkadi ta Azkatasuna* (Basque Homeland and Liberty / ETA) had been the perpetrators [3] and that it was very probable that al-Qaida or its associates were responsible. But Aznar, his cabinet and his ambassadors at the United Nations and worldwide insisted that ETA was guilty of the crime. The reaction to this lie was a massive "no" vote against the *Partido Popular* government, particularly from young people.

For the last two years journalists from the radio network *Cadena Cope* (belonging to the episcopal conference of the Catholic church), the newspaper *El Mundo*, some talk-show commentators, and members of the *Partido Popular* have been insisting that 11 March was the result of a plot between ETA, members of the Moroccan and Spanish intelligence services, the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Party / PSOE) and the media group Prisa (publisher of *El Pais* newspaper and the radio network *Cadena Ser*).

The conspiracy narrative

This group's theory has caused huge uncertainty and doubt among the population. It alleges that Aznar was persuaded that ETA had committed the massacre after receiving premeditated misinformation from the intelligence services. When he shared this information with the Spanish public, the response was a vigorous media campaign by *El Pais* and *Cadena Ser* accusing him of lying. Within seventy-two hours, the people voted to oust the Aznar government from office in the general election of 14 March (see Ivan Briscoe, "[A victory for Spain, not al-Qaida](#) [3]", March 2004).

The conspiracy argument continues by noting that the first step taken by the new socialist prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, was to withdraw the Spanish troops that Aznar had sent to Iraq. The point is twofold: that Zapatero accepted al-Qaida's blackmail (thus setting a very bad example to other countries), and that the whole cycle of events – from the [train attacks](#) [4] to the troop withdrawal – had been planned by the Islamist network.

The falsity of this view is evident: Zapatero had promised during his electoral campaign to bring the troops home, because he believed that the war in Iraq was illegal. His later decision was the democratic fulfilment of this promise.

The earlier stage of the theory is also groundless. The Spanish judicial investigation has not revealed the slightest evidence that ETA, nor any part of Morocco's or Spain's intelligence services, were involved in the 11-M plot. On the contrary, judge Juan del Olmo's indictment clearly identified the criminals: a group of fourteen (five of whom died in a suicide-blast in the Madrid suburb of Leganés on [3 April 2004](#) [5] when the police surrounded their hideout) politically affiliated to the Islamic Combatant Moroccan Group ([GICM](#) [6]). The GICM has links in France, Belgium, Iraq and Italy and the group's ideology was the radical *Salafist* interpretation of Islam (see "El juez culpa del 11-M, a una célula islamista local conectada con Irak, Francia, Bélgica e Italia", *El Pais*, 9 March 2006).

A democracy under siege

In the days after 11 March, it was refreshing and even surprising to see Spanish citizens reacting with calm, a lack of desire for revenge, and a strong reaffirmation of support for democracy, justice and tolerance. This restraint was even more impressive in light of the fact that Spain, a former colonial power in northern Morocco, has experienced both a heavy flow of [immigrants from Morocco](#) [6] and constant tension at the borders of its Ceuta and Melilla enclaves (adjacent to Morocco) over immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Spain and Morocco are also in [dispute](#) [7] over the status of [western Sahara](#) [7], fishing quotas, drug-trafficking and trade of agricultural produce.

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This [social restraint \[9\]](#) markedly contrasts with the reaction of a part of United States society after 11 September 2001. But the lack of demand for revenge, or of any racist or anti-Islamic cry in Spanish society, is also completely at variance with the warlike stance that the conspiracy group has been generating since 2004. This group's manipulation of 11-M casts a long shadow: it has, for example, caused division among the associations of victims of terrorism between those who have suffered ETA's [attacks \[10\]](#) and the relatives of the 11 March victims. Consequently, the *Partido Popular* and some journalists and associations of victims are currently engaged in a fierce campaign against the attempt by Zapatero's government to negotiate a ceasefire and initiate negotiations with ETA and its political wing over the constitutional future of the Basque country.

The 11 March agitators who are attacking Zapatero for seeking to end violence in and from the Basque country are also those who denounced him for entering talks about redefining the autonomous status of Cataluña (Catalonia). A coalition of socialists and nationalists are promoting a [change \[11\]](#) in this status in the Spanish *Cortes* (parliament) that would grant Cataluña more control over its tax revenues and recognition as "a nation" inside the Spanish state.

An additional political factor is the PSOE government's 2005 laws sanctioning gay marriage and a limit on the access to public funds of private schools belonging to the Catholic church. These reforms have provoked intense conservative [opposition \[12\]](#), conducted with a level of ferocity and unfairness that has few parallels in Europe in recent decades.

The problem, however, is less strong political criticism from the right than the fact that this coalition of political unfairness is every day "de-educating" Spanish citizens, generating doubts about the judicial system and public policy on every possible issue, and using all kinds of unconstitutional tools to pursue its offensive. The logic of such tactics was revealed when a senior military officer, [José Mena Aguado \[13\]](#), delivered a speech on 6 January 2006 saying that the army would be the instrument of last resort to secure Cataluña if the Catalan statute of autonomy "exceeds the limits" of the Spanish constitution. Although the defence minister José Bono [sacked \[14\]](#) Aguado, the *Partido Popular* showed sympathy for his words.

The incident, a month before the twenty-fifth anniversary of the [attempted coup \[15\]](#), is a sobering reminder that the commitment to democracy among sections of Spain's political right is instrumental rather than principled. After the moral example that Spanish society displayed two years ago, when instead of calling for war and more violence they opted for sorrow and reflection, the *Partido Popular* and its allies are today placing democracy under siege.

This article expresses the personal opinions of the author and not of the organisation to which he is affiliated.

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