

## From the shadows: Spain's election lessons

By Ivan Briscoe,  
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Over four traumatic days in March 2004, Spain acquainted itself with the Islamist terrorist carnage of "11-M", glimpsed a media empire fed on government spin, and switched sides *en masse* to support a boyish socialist leader determined to pull Spanish troops out of Iraq. As if emerging from a dream, the country awoke on the damp Monday morning of 15 March 2004 to discover that its conservative regime had fallen. When the flags were furled in the headquarters of the defeated *Partido Popular* (Popular Party / PP) in Madrid, party leader Mariano Rajoy allegedly spat the words "You and your war!" at his colleague, Spain's former prime minister [Jos  Mar a Aznar](#) [1].

Now, the [election](#) [2] of Sunday 9 March 2008 reveals that not even four years of unremitting venom from a jilted party (as well as a Basque echo of the Atocha bombings, the [murder](#) [3] of former socialist councillor Isa as Carrasco on 7 March) could undo the work of that extraordinary electoral spasm. The *Partido Socialista Obrero Espa ol* (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party / PSOE) of (a little less boyish) prime minister Jos  Luis Rodr guez Zapatero [won](#) [4] 43.7% of the vote, and increased by five (from 164 to 169) the seats it controls in the 350-seat congress. It remains firmly in power, albeit it does not have an overall [majority](#) [5] and will be obliged to seek a coalition with regional (probably Catalan) nationalists.

The PP's own similar increase in its cache of seats (148 to 154, on 40.1% of the vote) offers it little consolation - even though some loyalists, in the spirit of an entrenched, defiant minority, stubbornly "celebrated" as the results came in and called for Zapatero's resignation. The reality is that [Spain's](#) [6] political landscape is now dominated by the two main parties, yet it is the socialists who retain the political initiative. No balm can conceal that this was a defeat for Mariano Rajoy and his party.

### The political challenge

The PP's campaign was spurred on by a coterie of rightwing ideologues unique in Europe in their vehement self-belief - most vocal amongst them Federico Jim nez Losantos, breakfast-time presenter on the church-run [COPE](#) [7] radio station - and by a cluster of TV channels, newspapers, think-tanks and websites. But this type of support can also be a trap, as this super-partisan element helped convince the PP that the evils and naivete they ascribed to [Zapatero](#) [8] - over his peace talks

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with the Basque [8] armed group ETA, the investigations into the 11-M [8] bombings, his social policies and his devolution of power to the regions - were sufficient evidence of its own entitlement to rule.

As a result, the PP realised a bit too late that - beyond its possessive imagery of a "good" Spain in grave danger from various internal threats - it needed to address actual public concerns. The very fact that the PP was unable to close the gap [9] between itself and the socialists represents poor reward for the sheer volume of spite and disbelief it and its harder-line supporters poured on the prime minister.

From the perspective of an independent outsider, the Spanish right's failure to adjust to the routine democratic rigours of vote-winning is astounding. One pre-election poll revealed that 40% of Spaniards would never vote for the PP, a clear indication of the party's need to appeal to a wider social constituency. Yet in a case-study of political dogmatism the most moderate and admired senior party figure, Madrid's mayor Alberto Ruiz-Gallard [10], saw his path to a seat in congress blocked by his own colleagues. This remoteness from rational political calculation proved fatal to the PP.

Mariano Rajoy, [13] not himself an ideologue, eventually managed to shift his more virulent colleagues off-stage, offering instead a makeshift populist spectacle in his rallies and in two television debates with Zapatero: a series of charts recording rises in the prices of eggs, milk and chicken under the socialists; an invasion of 5 million immigrants, blamed by one prominent PP figure for clogging up hospitals with their clamour for "mammographies" and ruining "the enormous efficiency" of Spanish caf  service; and promises to lower taxes, increase cr che places, improve schools, lower house prices and ensure that every Spaniard is an English-speaking patriot.

If it didn't work, it was partly because the Francoist fumes emitted by the party in this period have been unmistakable. For the Spanish political centre as well as the left, the turn taken by the PP has amounted to a direct challenge to the political settlement - an elite-led, pact-governed [14] approach to rapid Spanish modernisation - established in and through the transition following the dictator Francisco Franco's death in November 1975. One result has been that almost by default Zapatero came to represent the pure negative of the conservative tirades - an innocent slaughtered daily for his democratic and progressive convictions, the true heir to his Republican grandfather killed in Le n in 1936.

### **The social hothouse**

But even as it seems to confirm total two-party domination of Spain's political landscape, the election result poses a direct challenge to their relatively easy polarity. This will become clear when the hermetic seal over the PP's internal affairs breaks open and battle begins between its factions - hardline counter-terrorists (headed by Jos  Maria Aznar), technocrats (epitomised by former International Monetary Fund boss Rodrigo Rato [15]), Bourbon modernisers (such as

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Ruiz-Gallardo) and neo-liberals (above all Esperanza Aguirre [16], a Thatcherite with a strong claim on the party leadership). At that point, Zapatero will find that his hold [17] on the country's progressive loyalties - casual as much as committed - will invite more demanding questioning.

"(Zapatero's) disappointed us all", wrote the novelist Juan Jos  Millas in *El Pa s* on election-day, "since there's no doubt that Spain is still there, with its bleeding bulls, bearded women, angry cardinals..." The vague sense that the PSOE's leaders' election victory of 2004 would bring final redemption for the civil war and dictatorship has been confounded, not least in the weak and watery "law on historical memory". So has any likelihood that Zapatero's government will thrust Spain into a radically novel historical phase - without abrasive nationalisms, class divisions, overweening bureaucracy or long and unproductive working hours. The one daring attempt to close a long conflict - the tentative talks with ETA, culminating in the pointless street shooting of Isa as Carrasco - were fruitless as well as widely denigrated, so far as to suggest that a further attempt might be postponed for good.

In this light, Zapatero's second election victory - anticipated by his superior performance in the two television debates [18] with Rajoy - reflect his command over the absurdities of indignant conservatism rather than backing for his political programme. Beyond a sweeping dedication to Scandinavian social entitlements - the source of his greatest achievements in office, from fast divorce laws to gay marriage, paternity leave and a  2,500 cheque for newborn babies - the prime minister shirked any strong defence of economic reform or social and political change. Immigration helps pay for Spaniards' pensions, he argues, but there was absolutely no mention of immigration as a cultural boon for a society closed off for half a century. "We are repatriating, and repatriating a lot more", he declared in a pre-election interview.

Zapatero's defensive assignment of immigration [19] to the field of sensible economic growth is echoed in the government's strange failure to grapple with other public issues. It promises investment in social housing and schools, but the underlying cascade of adolescent educational dropout, limited job opportunities for those without personal contacts (the infamous *enchufes*), and grossly overpriced property has earned no decent government response. In fact these problems are intimately connected. Quick-build towers now sprout up around cities like Madrid and Barcelona, housing a tense mixture of immigrants and poor Spaniards. Their services are limited, breeding competition and occasional acts of violence. It is precisely this pool of low-income tension that Rajoy dipped into, with a little help from a seasoned consultant in Latin American elections [20], Antonio Sol .

## The national hallmark

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Zapatero's social policies are laudable, but none seems able to resolve the difficulties and heal the schisms of a society that has been whirled within three decades from *caudillo* and Catholic rule into postmodern consumerism (and a new set of scourges: terror-cells, real-estate speculators and child obesity). The very rapidity of *this* transition is reflected in the fact that French philosopher-novelist Michel Houellebecq [21] planted his dystopian novel *The Possibility of an Island* in the swinging and sect-infested environs of Madrid and Almería. "There's a brief ideal period during the dissolution of strong religious societies when young people really want a free, unbridled, pleasurable life; then they tire of it, and bit by bit narcissistic competition resumes."

The consolidation of a two-party system [22] could perpetuate the shadow-play of the last four years. Alternatively, it could shift debate once and for all from contested definitions of Spanish nationality - the national anthem still has no words, though the stirring lyrics written by an unemployed *madrileño* photocopy-shop manager did win an official contest - onto the tough issues generated by rapid economic and urban growth, particularly if recession bites. Political leaders, right and left, feel comfortable with the sort of sparring that dates from the 1930s; they may each find encouragement in the re-election on 4 March 2008 of the reactionary archbishop, Antonio Rouco Varela, [23] to the titular leadership of Spain's Catholic church. The "nihilistic vocation to unseat power", in the words of sociologist Enrique Gil Calvo [24], is still a defining hallmark of Spanish political life; and this locks together right and left as well as separates them.

Jiménez Losantos, meanwhile, grumbled his way through Monday's post-electoral radio [25] show. It is now time for the right to look up, and look around: to decide how to address a plainly legitimate government, and to do so not on the field of antiquated national symbols but in the real, complicated world of modern Spain.

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- [17] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/europe/zapatero-edges-ahead-but-spains-election-fails-to-excite-voters-791345.html>
- [18] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/c8f608ec-e988-11dc-8365-0000779fd2ac.html>

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