

Nemesis Hits Spain's Aznar

by Elisabeth Hellenbroich

Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, one of the staunchest allies of the Bush Administration in its Iraq war drive, is, like his close friend British Prime Minister Tony Blair, finding himself confronted with a massive political uproar in his own country, which may very well lead to his removal from power. While Aznar's popular approval still stood at 37% a year ago, it dropped to 18% in January.

The ever-widening gulf between the government and the population—all opposition parties in Parliament, the leading trade unions, and many layers of the Catholic Church (including the Catholic Bishops Conference, the Cardinal of Barcelona, the Archbishop of Tarragona, and the Archbishop of Seville)—springs from several factors. More than 80% of the population are opposed to a war in Iraq, and the majority of Spaniards are disgusted by the intransigent and self-righteous hawkish position which Prime Minister Aznar and his government have been taking. Aznar has been denounced for acting “more in the name or the interest of U.S. President Bush than in the interest of the people of Spain.” Then there is Madrid's mishandling of Nov. 15 breakup of the *Prestige* oil tanker, off the coast of Galicia, which has caused an ecological disaster, and will have catastrophic economic effects.

Thirdly, there is a deepening gap between rich and poor, thanks to the country's major economic crisis. Spain's 21% unemployment is one of the highest in Europe, and growing. As result of the government's free-trade policy and adherence to globalization, 50,000 Spaniards lose their jobs annually, according to the magazine *Cambio 16*. Discontent is very high among small farmers and fishermen. In addition—as result of the deepening world economic crisis as well as the major repercussions of the Argentine and Ibero-American debt crises, the Spanish banking sector is in a very fragile condition with many banks threatened with going under in 2003.

The outrage against Aznar's policy, and the conflict between him and the political opposition, broke out in late January, when European newspapers published the “Open Letter of the Eight”—an unconditional “loyalty oath” to Bush Administration war policy delivered by eight heads of state and government. Aznar was the primary organizer of the letter, signed by the leaders of Britain, Spain, Italy, Poland, Hungary, Portugal, Denmark, and the Czech Republic. It became clear during several hours of tumultuous parliamentary debate on Feb. 5, in which Aznar explained his Iraq policy, that key figures of the opposition interpreted the letter as an “act of treason” by the Prime Minister, who had gone behind the

back of his European allies, and without consulting the parties in the Spanish Parliament.

The original text of the Jan. 30 letter had been conceived at the *Wall Street Journal*, which had sent it to Aznar, who in turn, after a long telephone discussion with Blair, “personally” organized the signatures from the six others. Those are the states which—as U.S. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld later provocatively put it—are part of the “New Europe” that Rumsfeld declared is more allied with the United States than with the “Old Europe” of France and Germany, which have allied to oppose the war. The letter was a direct response to the Franco-German initiatives in January, to more closely collaborate in the fields of foreign, economic and security policy, and aim their diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution to an Iraq war.

Aznar, a small-minded former financial official, gained his “military” reputation as commander during the spectacular Perejil Island Affair. This is a tiny island off the coast of Morocco, only inhabited by goats, which Aznar tried to reconquer by dispatching an entire Spanish Armada in June 2002. The Premier is personally obsessed about reviving Spain as a world power.

The state of mind of the Spanish Prime Minister became clinically clear during an address he gave to the directorate of his People’s Party (PP) on March 3. This was the eve of a second major parliamentary debate on the Iraq policy which took place March 4; Parliament voted in secret ballots on two motions: one presented by the PP in support of Aznar’s policy; and one by the opposition favoring a peaceful solution in the context of the UN Security Council. The PP motion prevailed by 183-164 with three abstentions. Aznar had said to his party leaders: “We don’t want to see Spain sitting in the corner of history, in the corner made for those countries [he didn’t say which countries he meant] which don’t count, which don’t serve, and which don’t decide. We want to see it in a different place, and we have fought for this for many years.” With a clear jab at France and Germany, Aznar had then criticized “those countries which try to divide the UN Security Council or the Atlantic Alliance, or which claim to have the ‘monopoly’ on the European voice. . . . It would be a step backward,” he concluded, “if the government listened to the protesters.”

Warn of First Use of Nuclear Weapons

The revealing parliamentary debate of Feb. 5 had been convoked upon the insistence of the opposition which wanted to force Aznar to officially explain his Iraq policy. Aznar voiced his unconditional support for a U.S.-led war, saying, “Either Iraq immediately disarms or we make war.” One parliamentarian after another from the opposition strongly denounced his policy. Socialist Party (PSOE) Chairman Luis Rodríguez Zapatero took the lead, expressing his firm solidarity with the Pope’s peace policy. Rodríguez Zapatero attacked the concept of “pre-emptive war” as representing a fundamental break with the principles of civilization; one could not declare war on a country to disarm it, he maintained, when it

is clear that there is no immediate danger from that country. A war would mean bombing and killing tens of thousands of civilians, and leave the country in ruins, Rodríguez Zapatero warned. He then sarcastically charged Prime Minister Aznar, “You took your decision alone, without consultation, and now you tell us you want to offer us consensus. What is the new consensus you have proposed? It is everything which Mr. Bush is saying.”

Rodríguez Zapatero was particularly outraged by Aznar’s treacherous role in the “Letter of the Eight.” “Spain is not on the side of the allies which represent the motor of the EU, referring to France and Germany, he said, “but it seems rather, that today we are on the side of the Euro-skeptics, and this is not in our national interest. The EU was weakened in its foreign policy, and you personally are responsible for this.”

Significantly, Rodríguez Zapatero also accused Aznar of damaging Spain’s relations with the Ibero-American countries by his self-righteous step. “Patriotism is dignity, and nothing is more anti-patriotic than total submission” to the U.S. and British war-hawks, he concluded. He was followed by the United Left (IU) Chairman Gaspar Llamazares, who called Aznar “Secretary of the U.S.A.” Llamazares also told Foreign Minister Ana Palacio that she knew perfectly well, that the United States and Great Britain would not refrain from the “use of nuclear weapons in the war against Iraq.”

Nationwide Protests

The debate was the prelude to a nationwide protest storm which swept through the country on Feb. 15. In the context of the unprecedented protests worldwide against the war on Iraq, more than 4 million Spaniards protested in 57 cities against the war policy of Aznar. These were the largest demonstrations in Europe, with 1.3 million in the city of Barcelona alone, and 1 million in Madrid.

A week later, on Feb. 24, some 250,000 people went into the streets of Madrid to denounce the Aznar government’s catastrophic handling of the *Prestige* affair. On Nov. 15, 2002, the aging and unsafe oil tanker *Prestige*, chartered for £13,000 a day by the Marc Rich-linked Crown Resources raw material trading company connected to the Russian Mafiya group Alfa, sank off the Galician Coast, with dramatic effects on Spain’s ecology, fishing and tourism. The government’s mishandling of the *Prestige* accident ranged from an incompetent decision to pull the wrecked oil tanker 120 miles out to sea, creating a gigantic oil spill polluting the Spanish, French, and Portuguese Atlantic coasts, to the very insufficient aid given by the army to clean up the coasts. The protesters demanded a parliamentary investigation to bring out the truth behind the affair and shed light on those responsible in the government.

The scale of the pressure on Aznar was shown by a recent commentary in the *Wall Street Journal*, which said that Aznar has indicated to the United States that he needs “help” from Washington to withstand the mounting political pressure he faces at home. Aznar suggested to President Bush that he should have “less Rumsfeld and more Powell”; to restrain

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, whose public outbursts have created an impossible situation for the European backers of a war against Iraq.

All over Spain, booktables are now organized to gather signatures against the war, while there are plans made for possible nationwide demonstrations on March 15 and March 21. The unprecedented ferment could indeed sweep the unpopular Prime Minister out of office sooner than he thinks. In an op-ed in the daily *El País* on March 4, the chief magistrate of the Audiencia Nacional, Balthazar Garzón, wrote, "I can't recall a degree of protest and authentic popular rebellion, like that which your position as Prime Minister of the government is generating in all layers and social classes of Spain. I also cannot recall the degree of cynicism displayed by leading politicians who use demagoguery and manipulate the media, to play on the fears of the citizens by bombarding them with lies."

Garzón told the Aznar to defend the right of justice, join with the Pope, and decide "whether he wants to be a great statesman and take a position which the entire civilized world, the French, Germans, Russians, Chinese, and Syrians have taken, and join the battle cry in the opposition against war." He ended by asking Aznar, at what price he is willing to participate in the war, "a price which will be covered by the blood of thousands of innocents" and which ultimately will mean political suicide for Aznar.

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