

From Fascism to Democracy in Spain

The End of Aznar, Bush's Best Friend

By VICENTE NAVARRO

The Spanish fascist dictatorship led by General Franco was one of the most repressive regimes to have existed in Western Europe in the 20th Century. For every political assassination that took place under the Mussolini regime, Franco assassinated 10,000. The Franco dictatorship was established by the Armed Forces, the Church, the banking community, the large employers, the oligarchic land owners, and sectors of the middle class after a military coup took place in 1936 against a democratically elected government who had enacted major reforms that had injured the pro-Franco groups' interests. The elected government was very popular because it introduced the public school system (controlled until then by the Catholic Church), social security, land reform, divorce and the abortion laws, and other public policies that benefited the working class and other components of the popular classes.

The savage repression by the Franco regime (that lasted forty years, 1939-1977) was particularly harsh on the working class, a repression that continued up to the very end of the regime. Nearly one million died in the popular resistance against the coup and afterwards. Even on the year of his death, Franco signed five death sentences for members of the anti-fascist resistance. The two major foreign powers that supported the Franco regime were the U.S. government (both Republican and Democratic administrations) and the Vatican. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Spaniards have been the least pro-U.S. in Europe and the least among southern European countries to attend catholic masses on Sundays.

The transition from dictatorship to democracy was triggered in large part by a growing popular resistance against the Franco regime. From 1974 to 1977 (the dictator died on November 20, 1975, day the country ran out of champagne), Spain was the country in Europe that had the most general strikes. These working class mobilizations and

the "Revolution of the Carnations" in nearby Portugal worried the Francoist establishment, which controlled the state apparatuses and the media outlets in Spain. In addition, the U.S. government expressed the concern that they could lose control over the Spanish geopolitical territory. The U.S. passed word to the head of that Francoist establishment, the King, that something needed to change. The U.S. ambassador told the King to become friendlier with and more knowledgeable of the Spanish working class. This was the first time the U.S. ambassador had used the expression "working class" in his exchanges with the King.

The transition from dictatorship to democracy took place in a manner very favorable to the right, which still controlled the Army, the state machinery, and the media. A right-wing condition for the transition to democracy was the retention of the Monarchy and the establishment of an electoral law that would benefit the right enormously. Even today, Avila, one of the most conservative regions in Spain, needs only 30,000 votes to place a member in the Parliament, while Barcelona, a progressive region, needs 150,000. In spite of this discrimination, the left, represented by the social democratic party PSOE, won big in 1982, and established the welfare state, including the universalization of public education and health care. This was a time of reforms and explains the popular support of that government during the period of 1982 to 1993.

The PSOE, however, was divided between its own right and the left. The right was influential in the economic and labor ministries, and was responsible for some labor market reforms that triggered three general strikes, an unprecedented phenomenon in Europe. Social democratic governments do not usually have to face general strikes. The PSOE, however, did, and, in 1993, the right became the dominant force within the PSOE. The leader of the left in the PSOE, Alfonso Guerra, Vice President of the government, had resigned one year before, and the transformation of the PSOE was completed. In 1993, the leading force in the PSOE's economic policies was its Minister of Economic and Finances, Pedro Solbes, who enacted enormous cuts in social expenditures (social public expenditures per capita declined for the first time since democracy was established) in order to eliminate the government's budget deficit, as intended by the Maastrich criteria, a goal required to reach the monetary union. These policies became very unpopular and were one of the reasons for the PSOE's defeat in 1996, thus allowing the victory of the right-wing party. It is important to stress that the defeat of the PSOE in 1996 was primarily caused by the de-mobilization of its grassroots and the substantial growth of abstention among the working class. That defeat started a whole process of deterioration of the left in Spain. Pedro Solbes, incidentally, was appointed, with the support of not only the PSOE but also the major conservative party, the Popular

Party (PP), as the European Commissioner for Economic and Finance Affairs, thus directing a program of social austerity all over the EU. His latest effort was his aggressive campaign against the German and French governments (both countries in profound recession) for not eliminating their public deficits.

The conservative party, PP, which became the governing party in Spain in 1996, was founded by Fraga Iribarne, who was Minister of Information and of the Interior (in charge of the hated political police) during the Franco regime. He had signed the death sentence of Grimau, a leader of the anti-fascist underground who belonged to the clandestine Communist Party, the major force in the anti-fascist resistance. He is proud of his fascist past, having recently written a prologue to a book that denies the existence of the Holocaust. He has repeatedly said that Franco was the greatest European and Spanish leader of the 20th century. His main disciple is Aznar, who had been a member of the fascist youth and who had campaigned against the establishment of the new democratic constitution. Aznar also criticized the democratically elected municipal government of Guernica (the town destroyed by the Nazi air forces allied with Franco's Armed Forces) for changing the name of its main square from Caudillo's Square to Liberty Square (during the fascist regime all main squares of any town, city, or village had to be named after General Franco, referred to in Spain in the official rhetoric as Caudillo). This Aznar is the same Aznar that the U.S. Congress is ready to grant a Congressional Medal of Honor to, in the process offending the thousands of American soldiers who died in World War II fighting Nazism and fascism.

The major forces in the PP are the monarchic forces, the employers associations, banking institutions, the Church, and the large land owners, among others, i.e., the same cast of characters who have been ruling Spain for most of the 20th century, except for those short periods of democracy that Spain enjoyed in that century. The PP has a very limited democratic culture. Its congresses are the most similar to the Bulgarian Communist Party congresses. All resolutions are approved by a 100% vote and the leader, Aznar, is practically omnipotent. His major objective in foreign policy was to become the closest European ally to the Bush Administration. He and Bush became close friends very quickly.

Both are religious ultras. Aznar's wife is a member of, the Christian Legionaires, one of the most ultra right wing Catholic sects in existence today. In addition, several members of Aznar's cabinet belong to Opus Dei, also defined by the Belgian Parliament as a Christian sect, and there are members who are children of prominent fascist families that played key roles under the fascist regime. Aznar,

as Franco before him, made the Spanish government into a mere puppet of the U.S. government.

One of the most unpopular policies developed by Aznar was the support of Bush's invasion and occupation of Iraq. That support has meant the provision of Spanish troops for the military campaign. During the last mobilization against the war, one year ago, one out of every five adults in Spain went to the street to march in protest against such an invasion. A main slogan during the march was "It is a Bush-Aznar war; not our war". The polls systematically showed the Spanish population as the most anti-Iraqi-war population in Europe.

The PP government, however, ignored the demonstrations, justifying support for the Iraq war by saying that terrorism needed to be fought. . Spain has had to face a terrorist group, the Basque pro-independent party ETA, which is immensely unpopular in Spain and even in the Basque country. The PP presented itself as the party of law and order, the toughest party against ETA, linking ETA with all other forms of terrorism.

This explains why, when the massacre took place on Thursday, 11 March in Madrid, the PP, who controls all major public media in Spain (and influences the majority of oral, visual, and written media), presented ETA as the terrorist group behind the massacre, trying to capitalize on the enormous popular anger expressed by the mass demonstrations that took place all over in Spain to mourn the deaths in that massacre. If successful in its manipulation of the media, the PP believed it could get an overwhelming vote of support in the next Sunday election, March 14, giving it a large majority in the Parliament. The Minister of the Interior, Acebes, and the Minister of Foreign Relations, Ana Palacio (one of the closest allies and a personal friend of Powell, Secretary of State of the Bush Administration) were the major PP spokespersons promoting the idea of ETA responsibility for the massacre. The government's credibility, however, was very low among the population and very much in particular among the working class, whose anger was especially accentuated because most of the killings took place in a working class neighborhood in Madrid. By Friday and Saturday, there were huge mass demonstrations, quite spontaneous and without any party's involvement, questioning the PP's explanations. When Aznar presided at the mourning ceremonies, he was booed by the public, who called him a liar and an assassin. Soon, information came out that Islamic radical fundamentalists linked to Al Qaeda were the actual assassins, which allowed linkage between that massacre and the war in Iraq. The demonstrations against the murders quickly became demonstrations against the PP government. One of the most frequently heard slogans in Saturday's demonstrations was, "They put their war, we put our death". On Election Day, that anger was

channeled against the PP, resulting in its enormous defeat. Most importantly, three million people who had previously abstained from voting for the PSOE decided to vote for it as a way of getting rid of Aznar, one of the most unpopular figures in Spain today. Bush, who has never been liked in Spain, remains the most unpopular foreign figure among the Spanish people.

The mobilization of the young and those sectors of the popular classes that had abstained in the previous elections were key to the PSOE's victory. It is true that the growing popular frustrations with the PP government had made the PSOE more attractive, thus closing the gap (according to the polls) between the two parties. But in Spain (and I believe in other countries, including the U.S.) whether the major left wing parties win or lose on election day depends on whether their working class supporters stay home or decide to vote. The move to the right by the PSOE, (accepting uncritically most of the neoliberal dogma) had demoralized the grassroots of the party and increased abstention in previous elections. The anger against the PP, and the massacre of March 11 were, however, the trigger points for the three million more votes the PSOE received (the exit polls showed that most of these three million votes were from young people who had never voted before and from the working class, which had abstained in previous elections). It was not so much love for the PSOE than it was disgust with the PP that explains PSOE victory. Zapatero, the secretary general of the PSOE and new President of the Spanish government, was elected three years ago with the support of the left wing branch of the PSOE. His first act, after elected, was to visit the tomb of Pablo Iglesias, the founder of the Socialist Party and of the socialist union U.G.T, accompanied by the head of the socialist trade union (one of the most popular figures in Spain, Candido Mendez),

His second act was to indicate--as he had promised in the election campaign--that, by no later than June 30, all Spanish troops are to be withdrawn from Iraq, and he has quite openly criticized Bush and Blair's policies regarding that war. Zapatero is aware that his election victory is due to the mobilization of the left wing electorate and his greatest challenge is in retaining it. This is why it is unlikely he will backtrack on that commitment, knowing that that war and occupation is immensely unpopular; it was unpopular before March 11 and it continues to be unpopular after March 11. Zapatero is also aware of the enormous contempt the Spanish people have for the Bush administration.

The withdrawal of the Spanish troops could stimulate the withdrawal of Italian and Polish troops, leading in this way to the dismantling of the Bush coalition.

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