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Spain

A new political cycle

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The days that passed between the massacre in Madrid on March 11, 2004 and the parliamentary elections of March 14, were particularly moving and tense, but they demonstrated the existence of a critical and active citizenship capable of resisting government propaganda, disinformation and fear.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/35822.jpg>]

Zapatero, smelling of roses

In the end, the deaths were followed by a defeat of the right wing Partido Popular (PP) government, something recognized internationally as a triumph for those opposed to the Iraq war, a rejection of the lies of outgoing prime minister Aznar and a desire for political change which for more than a year has been expressed in many mobilizations. The possibility of a real change in the policies followed for at least the last four years is attenuated by the fact that this new cycle will develop under the hegemony of the social democratic PSOE party, which aspires to a "centrist" policy and with the left wing United Left (Izquierda Unida - IU) weakened electorally and socially. In these conditions it will be necessary to do a lot of work so that alternative policies and another left are possible.

The commotion provoked by the slaughter of more than two hundred people, the majority of them workers and young people, with among these many immigrants, created a new situation in which indignation and solidarity in reaction to the massacre were accompanied by doubts as to the perpetrators of such a terrible attack; doubts which grew in the face of the conscious manipulation of information by a government which sought at all costs to attribute responsibility to the Basque separatist group ETA, since this was the hypothesis that was most favourable to their electoral interests.

Not content with this, Aznar called on citizens to demonstrate "in defence of the Constitution" and "for the defeat of terrorism", hoping thus to channel solidarity with the victims into support for his own objectives. But in many of the demonstrations of Friday March 12 shouts of "Who did it?" and "No to War" were taken up by the participants. The same was true on Saturday March 13, to the surprise of the party apparatuses, including that of the IU, as self-organized street protests before the offices of the PP gained in strength to the extent that the conviction grew that Al Qaeda was behind the massacre and the government had lied. The cry "The deaths are ours, the war is yours" was perhaps the one that best expressed the popular indignation.

Thus the PP's "anti-terrorism" ended up becoming a weapon against that party, reminding people of the opposition to the Iraq war and the lies about weapons of mass destruction told by Aznar and his friends Bush and Blair. The result was a remarkable increase in electoral participation, especially among youth, and the concentration of vote behind PSOE leader Zapatero, who had announced that he would only form a government if he obtained more votes than Rajoy, the candidate of the PP.

The political formation hardest hit by the pressure for a "useful vote" was the IU (whose parliamentary representation fell from nine to five deputies, two of these courtesy of its Catalan ally), already affected by an electoral system that meant that the third biggest electoral force (more than 1.2 million votes) had less representation than the Catalan nationalist forces of the right (Convergència i Unió) and left (ERC, Esquerra Republicana Catalana, which increased its representation from one to eight deputies) and the Basque Nationalist Party.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/35823.jpg>]

The rise of the ERC is undoubtedly significant and seems to express a vote of solidarity in reaction to the attempts at criminalization of dialogue and Catalan nationalism (the ERC leader had opened a dialogue with ETA) than positive

support for a still indefinite project. The seat gained by the Nafarroa Bai [1] coalition in Navarre is also significant, while in the Basque country Aralar-Zutik, [2] in spite of not obtaining parliamentary representation, obtained a good results that should make Batasuna (who called for abstention) think about its future in case ETA does not decide to declare an indefinite truce throughout the Spanish state.

A new stage has opened, then, in which the PSOE is the winner but without an absolute majority (it was 12 deputies short) and is forced to count on the support of other left and nationalist parties to pursue a new policy. Because it is obvious that most of those who voted for the PSOE are demanding and will demand a radical turn in relation to the policies followed by the PP for at least the last four years. They want an end to authoritarianism and the manipulation of the public media, an end to the alliance with Bush's strategy of "global and permanent war", the immediate withdrawal of the Spanish forces occupying Iraq, an end to the neoliberal offensive against basic public services and social rights, a commitment to recognizing the pluri-national reality of the Spanish State and the opening of a dialogue leading to respect for Euskadi and Catalan self-determination, the defence of a socio-ecological conception of "security" against the xenophobic vision that predominates not only in the Spanish state but also in the EU and the West.

Neither the program nor the foreseeable composition of the new PSOE government nor, above all, the pressures of the Spanish, European and US "powers that be" indicate that Zapatero is going to fulfil those expectations. For that reason it will be necessary to continue the social mobilization and the effort to build a "left of the left". This latter task will necessitate a reorientation and self-reform of the IU (difficult, but not impossible). The recent mobilizations show us that there is enough "alternative social capital" to advance in this direction.

There is no doubt that the IU's electoral results were affected by the pressure for a "useful vote" and the competition in some Autonomous Communities from other forces of the nationalistic left, although Ezker Batua's [3] vote held up well and they almost won a seat. But many think that the type of discourse developed by the IU leadership, before and during the campaign and particularly in its final days, did not resist the tactics adopted by the PSOE leadership.

For a long time the IU has wished to appear as a force ready to govern with the PSOE not only at the municipal and autonomous community level but at the state level. The increasing inclination in this direction to appear as "trustworthy" in relation to a PSOE that did not hide its political moderation, especially in terms of fiscal and economic policy, had the following effects:

- lukewarm and depoliticized slogans
- a consciously ambiguous presentation of important aspects of the IU programme, such as the timid defence of pluri-nationality
- most particularly, the performance after the massacre of March 11, when IU leader Llamazares did not cast any doubt on the government's attribution of responsibility to ETA and supported their call for demonstrations, even on the Saturday when the hypothesis that Al Qaeda was responsible was already recognized. Many IU leaders disapproved of the protests before the PP offices, considering them a provocation.

In our view, the aspiration to be a complementary force to the PSOE predominated throughout the campaign, reinforcing an image of subordination. This could explain, at least partially, why some potential IU voters preferred to vote directly for the PSOE and not for an IU which was barely differentiated from it.

There were also other, more internal factors, primarily the progressive transformation of IU into a party with an increasingly weak internal political life, subordinated to electoral and institutional policy and with an increasingly

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autonomous leadership team that has acted and made decisions on many occasions without reference to the relevant bodies.

A refoundation of IU is needed so that it can play a role in the new political cycle, putting at the centre of its activity its reconstruction as an active and repoliticized organization at the service of the mobilization of citizens and in particular for the transformation of the “movement of movements” into a force which can bring about a left turn on the Spanish, European and global scale.

The first challenge that faces us, in addition to confronting the new stage while avoiding the stumbling blocks of tailism and sectarianism in relation to the new government, is to approach the coming elections to the European Parliament without hiding the truth on the neoliberal and militaristic content of the draft European Constitution and expressing a full rejection of it, surpassing the ambiguities shown lately on the type of left that needs to be built not just in the Spanish state but also within the European framework.

[1] Nafarroa Bai is an electoral coalition formed in Navarre by the Partido Basque Nacionalista (PNV), Eusko Alkartasuna (EA), Aralar (a split from Batasuna) and Batzarre (an organization promoted by Zutik and independent sectors of social movements). The central subject of its campaign was the defence of a new relationship with Euskadi that would allow an advance towards some type of future convergence in a common framework of respectful coexistence of different identities.

[2] As already it has been indicated, Aralar is a split from Batasuna and Zutik is a product of the fusion of two old organizations of the radical left, the MC and the LCR.

[3] Ezker Batua-IU has tried to maintain its autonomy within the IU set and it is likely that it will try to reinforce it in the new stage; this could allow an approach to Aralar and Zutik that would undoubtedly help the process of reconstruction of a Basque radical left freed from political dependence on ETA.