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'Historic reversal' - and a warning *Bombs & ballots in Spain*

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writes on Latin American politics

Three days after the devastating March 11 bombings in Madrid that killed at least 200 people and wounded more than 1,600, Spaniards have voted out President Bush's most conspicuous ally on Iraq in continental Europe.

The March 14 vote, which came as a huge surprise, has large implications for Spain, for Europe, and even for U.S. domestic politics.

Spain's conservative prime minister, José María Aznar, not only stood by Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair in backing the war; he even sent Spanish troops to serve in the occupation of Iraq under U.S. command. Only a week ago, U.S. administration officials were gleeful that polls predicted an overwhelming victory for Aznar's chosen successor, Mariano Rajoy, who had pledged to continue his predecessor's alignment with the Bush administration and to keep the Spanish troops in Iraq as long as necessary.

But on Sunday, Spaniards voted overwhelmingly for the opposition Socialist Party, electing as prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, whose campaign was based on his pledge to reverse his country's subservience to U.S. foreign policy. Zapatero has also pledged to withdraw Spain's 1,300 troops from Iraq unless the United Nations takes over command of the occupation by July 1.

Was this "historic reversal" (*vuelco histórico*, as they're calling it in Spain) a panic response to terror? Did Spanish voters hope to appease al-Qaeda, which now seems to be the most likely culprit in last week's bombings?

That may have been a motive for some voters, but it can hardly account for the Socialists' 11 million votes all across the country - more than they had ever won even when they were the governing party from 1982 to 1996. There are deeper reasons for the conservative debacle.

Aznar's Popular Party had long ceased to be really "popular," in the Spanish sense of responding to the demands of ordinary people who were not rich or politically connected. And Aznar had antagonized regional governments and grossly mishandled the 2002 oil spill from the tanker *Prestige*, off the coast of the northwestern province of Galicia. The subsequent devastation of vast areas of beaches and seabed resources infuriated Spaniards across the country. Aznar also had pushed through parliament a controversial measure for the state to pay for religious education in public schools. That may have won him votes in some sectors, but it caused bitter resentment in others.

Most damaging of all was Aznar's decision to support Bush in going to war on Iraq, against 90 percent of public opinion and huge street demonstrations just before the war.

Then came Thursday's horror - along with doubt as to whether the bombings had been the work of the Basque separatist terrorist group ETA, guilty of many smaller-scale bombings and assassinations, or Muslim extremists linked to al-Qaeda. If the former, then Aznar's hard line against terror seemed vindicated. If the latter, then it appeared that his support of the United States had more devastating effects at home than anyone had ever imagined.

As the evidence that it had been al-Qaeda (or somebody sympathetic to them) kept growing, the government kept insisting it was ETA, and that was enough to convince Spaniards that the government was willing to play with the facts for political advantage.

The Madrid bombings awakened millions who had not planned to vote, making them aware that it did indeed make an enormous difference whom they elected to govern them. They came out to the polls in numbers that had not been seen since 1996, with a turnout of 77.2 percent.

For Spain, that means a more independent foreign policy and a more active and vigilant electorate. For Europe, it suggests a closer alliance of Spain with France and Germany than to Tony Blair or the Bush State Department. And it reminds us that, if Spaniards can use their votes to oust an unresponsive government thought to manipulate the truth to serve policies of endless and pointless aggression, others can as well.

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