Spanish Election Alters Latin American Politics

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Spanish Election Alters Latin American Politics

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Latin America
Published: 2004-03-26

Spanish voters' decision to throw Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's Partido Popular (PP) out of power has broad implications for Spain's policy toward Latin America, with the winning Partido Socialista Obrera de Espana (PSOE) promising to renew its ties with countries across the Atlantic. In South America, those changes have become apparent most quickly in Colombia, while in other countries many politicians and analysts are foreseeing future relations with Spain quite differently than they had one month ago.

The elections, held four days after a bombing of trains in Madrid left more than 200 dead and almost 1,500 injured, brought victory to Socialist leader Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero. Spanish voters resented the attempts by Aznar's right-wing government to portray the bombing as an attack by the Basque separatist group ETA, even as evidence emerged to link the attack with al Qaeda.

The election hinged on that issue, since PSOE leaders had previously encouraged negotiation with Basque political groups, while Aznar had led Spain to war in Iraq hand-in-hand with US President George W. Bush, despite the opposition of the overwhelming majority of Spanish citizens. The vote, which saw a huge turnout, seemed to show that Spanish citizens believed the pro-US policies of Aznar had put them at greater risk of terrorist attack, rather than made them safer.

The ripples of Zapatero's triumph became immediately palpable, with the prime minister-elect calling the occupation of Iraq "a disaster" and promising to withdraw Spain's 1,300 troops from Iraq by summer if the UN did not take political control of the occupation. This led Honduras to say it would also remove its more than 300 troops along a similar timeline (see NotiCen, 2004-03-18) and emboldened the head of Poland to say that he had been "misled" by Bush.

The Polish president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, said he felt "uncomfortable because we were misled by the information on weapons of mass destruction." He did not say he would withdraw his country's 2,400 troops, the third-largest force in the region after the US and Britain, from Iraq on the same timeline Zapatero was planning, though he said his troops could leave earlier than planned.

Bush's appearance with Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, designed to show that his base of international allies was not crumbling, left many reporters unconvinced as they later grilled White House spokesman Scott McClellan about Balkenende's not-so-resounding endorsement of the occupation. When reporters asked Bush and Balkenende whether Dutch troops would remain in Iraq, neither gave a firm answer.

Uribe loses European

ally Colombia is also scrambling to maintain support for its war policies with the fall of Aznar and the PP. Aznar was Colombian President Alvaro Uribe's most vocal supporter of his hard-line
military policy in the civil war there. While many European parliamentarians and human rights groups have pressured Uribe on his draconian security policies, Aznar backed him as a fighter against terrorism.

The condemnation from European Union (EU) leaders was so strong that many characterized Uribe's February visit to the EU as a "failure" (see NotiSur, 2004-02-13). Uribe had at least one firm European ally in Aznar, who helped defend him from the increasing criticisms from the rest of the EU. Colombia expects to continue "anti-terrorist" operations with the cooperation of the new Spanish administration, though Zapatero said he intends to review agreements between the two countries.

The incoming Spanish government will review the contents of the Protocol of Cooperation between the Ministries of Defense of Spain and Colombia. The document, signed by Aznar and Uribe last month, allows Colombia to buy 20 howitzers, 40 tanks, and artillery pieces from Spain.

The PSOE said it would honor the commitments the Spanish government had made and said it was pleased with the "donation to Colombia of two medically equipped airplanes, which will allow the evacuation of wounded from remote zones of their territory. The remaining aspects of the protocol are being considered in the process of transferring power."

Colombian Minister of Defense Jorge Alberto Uribe called the tank sale "a done deal," although "anything is possible" with the revision process by the new Spanish government underway. Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos said he expected "continuity" in the anti-terrorist collaboration between the two countries. "There may be some discordant voices, but the basic policy toward such an important matter as combating terrorism is the same," he said.

President Uribe expressed similar public confidence, saying, "Our security policy is for heightening democracy. It does it before the world and that is gaining the world's support." Yet Uribe moved quickly to consolidate his support from the US, having lost his only serious backer in Europe.

In a visit to the US, in meetings with Bush he asked for more military aid, sought to advance free-trade negotiations between the two countries, and played up advances in the operations against coca cultivation. Some Colombian politicians hope that Zapatero's triumph could open a space to reactivate dialogue.

Opposition Deputy German Navas from the Polo Democratico Independiente (PDI) said the socialist win paves the way to a distinct vision of how to resolve the Colombian conflict. "With a new Spanish government now, one doesn't only think in terms of force but also in terms of dialogue, and that can help favor a climate of political negotiation in the armed conflict," said Navas.

Liberal legislator Guillermo Rivera concurred, believing Zapatero could give priority to social projects rather than the military vision that Aznar pursued when dealing with the Colombian conflict. With the fall of Aznar, the EU could become a unified bloc of opposition to hard-line military policies in the Colombian government. While this will probably not be enough to offset US
support for that government's war against "narcoterrorists," it may mitigate some of its impacts. Zapatero said at one news briefing, "My government will be deeply pro-European. We will recover our traditional strong ties with Europe, Latin America, and the Mediterranean region."

Since the region has generally opposed US-sponsored warfare in the past two years, it is safe to assume that Zapatero will take a dim view of Plan Colombia.

**South American leaders congratulate Zapatero**

Just as they had sent their support and sympathy to the Spanish government in the day after the Madrid bombing, presidents of the Latin American region sent their congratulations to Zapatero. They also expressed their optimism for the new administration, though no specific policy changes have become immediately obvious. Chilean President Ricardo Lagos said the triumph of the socialists would open a "new era" in Spain's foreign policy.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said, "I'm sure that the strategic coming together that Brazil and Spain have accomplished in the past year will gain breadth and depth during [Zapatero's] government." Lula sent "a warm embrace" to "our friends" in the PSOE and expressed confidence that, with the ascent of the PSOE, world leaders would reflect and understand that "the people want neither war nor terrorism."

In Peru, the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA) received a letter from Zapatero after it sent him congratulations, a letter that hailed "a new horizon in relations with the Ibero-American community." Zapatero thanked APRA for its assertion that his triumph "signifies the defeat of terrorist groups and the return of social emphasis in the management of state policies" in Spain.

Bolivian opposition leader Evo Morales of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) similarly said that the Zapatero win let him hope for "a new era" in Ibero-American relations. He called the decision to withdraw troops from Iraq "an act that shows the democratic vocation of your government and a sense of respect for the peoples" of the world. He said the elections "vindicate the deeply democratic and humanistic sentiments" of Spain.

Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez said the PSOE victory sent "many good signals" for Latin America and other parts of the world. "From here we greet the Spanish people, who have years of tradition fighting for democracy, respect of life and dignity, and the triumph of Rodriguez Zapatero seems very important to me," Chavez said on his radio and television program Alo, Presidente! "We are paying attention because this is very positive, I'm sure of it, and I'm not just thinking of Venezuela." Chavez praised Zapatero's decision to condemn the "aggression in Iraq," saying "the people speak, break chains, the people see beyond lies and hear beyond walls."

Earlier, Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel and Foreign Relations Minister Jesus Perez said they hoped that with the PSOE they would be able to improve the "sullied relations" between the two countries. They attributed the sullied relations to the reaction of the Aznar government to the temporary overthrow of Chavez in April 2002.
Some analysts believe there may be a thaw in relations between Cuba and Spain under the PSOE, and many Latin American immigrants working in Spain could face easier policies. Other analysts do not believe there will be any radical changes from PP policies under the PSOE.

Juan Jose Ruiz, Latin America strategy director for Banco Santander, one of Spain's largest banks, said, "Relations with Latin America go beyond changes of government because the strategy is medium- to long-term in nature, and if I had to make a prediction, I would say those relations will just keep growing stronger."

Argentina ends its war of the words with Aznar

Argentina and Spain experienced a brief, albeit subdued, war of words in February when Aznar, referring to Argentina's difficult negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its multibillion-dollar creditors, said the country should "help itself." Aznar said that "Spain is always in favor of Argentina," and to overcome its debt crisis "all that's lacking is that Argentina is in favor of Argentina." He said there would be no economic future "for any country at the margins of the system of international finance."

President Nestor Kirchner fired back at the Spanish executive with an ironic statement, saying, "Argentina is helping itself now that it's defending its interests." He added that Aznar's statement was "one of the happiest phrases that I have heard in recent times. For many years we had dealings in which you turned your back on the needs of Argentina."

Kirchner, who has generally negotiated in a somewhat defiant manner with the IMF, recalled that international financial organizations "helped us to put ourselves in debt. That is what happens with our financial organizations, and we would like to reverse that. And taking into account the phrase you [Aznar] said, we want Argentina to help itself."

Argentine Interior Minister Anibal Fernandez had earlier responded to Aznar's comments negatively, saying "Serious presidents from serious countries never advise presidents of other countries." Kirchner, conversely, appears to be eager to begin friendlier relations with Zapatero's government. An official spokesperson called Zapatero "a friend of Argentina."

-- End --