

## **'IDEOLOGY' OR 'UNITY'? SPAIN'S FUTURE AFTER THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF MARCH 9, 2008**

*Michael Däumer / Sebastian Grundberger / Malte Kähler*

The winners of the elections held on March 9 of this year are Spain's socialists led by José Rodríguez Zapatero. However, not only the PSOE, which has been ruling the country for four years, but also the non-socialist PP gained strength. The smaller political parties, especially those of the left, emerged weaker than before. Spain has been polarized and ideologically divided before these elections. Now, not only will the old/new head of government have to overcome *crispación*; the opposition will have to abandon its strategy of constantly accusing the government of lying.

35 million Spaniards re-elected the two chambers of their parliament, the Cortes Generales. The 350 MPs of the Congreso de los Diputados were appointed in Spain's 52 provinces, with 50 provinces obtaining at least two seats each, while the two exclaves, Ceuta and Melilla, won only one seat each. At 43.64 percent, the PSOE gained one percentage point compared to 2004. Despite this victory, however, the socialists missed the absolute majority of 176 mandates in the Congreso by seven seats. At 40.11 percent, the PP also succeeded in expanding its position. The United Left (IU) lost somewhat more than one percentage point, coming in at only 3.8 percent. Catalonia's left-wing nationalists slipped to 1.17 percent. With only six mandates, the Basque nationalist PNV also ranks among the losers. Only Catalonia's party alliance CiU succeeded in hanging on to its previous ten seats. In the second chamber, the Senado, the PSOE did gain another eight mandates, but it still is only the second-strongest force after the PP with its 101 seats. The election result of March 2008 consolidated Spain's two-party system.

The polls were overshadowed by terror: Only a few days before the elections, the Basque ETA murdered a former local PSOE politician in the Basque region, whereupon Mr Zapatero and Mr Rajoy, the front-runners of the PSOE and the PP, agreed to end the election campaign and cancel their final rallies. However, the dispute about anti-terror policy went on: The PP criticized the agreement with the PSOE because it did not suspend the negotiations with the ETA, which the parliament had previously approved. The socialists, in turn, considered this scandalous. It is hard to say whether and to what extent the assassination influenced the behaviour of the voters; it may have slightly reinforced the pro-socialist trend. However, at least it showed the Spanish population once again that the terror of the ETA still poses an unabated threat.

To be sure, the potential backing of the PSOE is greater than that of the PP; however, it is also more volatile and less rooted in a specific milieu. Therefore, the socialists sought to arouse emotions: 'Motivos para creer' (Reasons to believe) was their first slogan, followed by 'Vota con todas tus Fuerzas' (Vote with all your might) later on. Their own election homepage was entitled 'La Mirada positiva' (The positive view). The election campaign of the PSOE was clearly dominated by the person of Mr Zapatero. The message was that the front-runner of the opposing PP, Mr Rajoy, was a representative of the extreme right wing, while the head of government stood for an open, modern and free society.

The Populares, on the other hand, never tired of accusing Mr Zapatero of having betrayed the Spanish population in his negotiations with the ETA. Slogans such as 'Las ideas claras' (With clear ideas) and 'Con cabeza y corazón' (With head and heart) were intended to relieve Mr Rajoy of his image of a boring bureaucrat. Moreover, the PP conveyed the impression of being a steady and reliable force. Once again advertising in blue, the non-socialists addressed issues such as the crisis which allegedly threatened the economy, a tougher anti-terror policy, and a more restrictive course on immigration. However, the election campaign of the PP failed: On the one hand, the party did not succeed in presenting itself as a constructive force; on the other, it abandoned its own course of positive self-portrayal, attacking instead the 'lies' of the head of government.

At the climax of the election campaign, there were two television duels that, although conducted with great rhetorical effort, offered hardly anything new. While Mr Zapatero's challenger, Mr Rajoy, showed himself belligerent at their first encounter, making the head of government sweat, Mr Zapatero turned the tables in the second round and took the lead. The 'Americanization' of the Spanish election campaign was reflected not only in the two parties' own YouTube channels but also in diverse video presentations placed on the internet, some of which were highly professional. What is more, surveys were conducted to keep the people from losing sight of the political parties, with results that contrasted greatly depending on the medium in which they were published. Furthermore, mass events in sports stadiums and bull rings, atmospherically enhanced with confetti, flags, and music, demonstrated the new appearance of the parties in their attempt to appeal to the country's media.

The election campaign that ended on the evening of March 9 had lasted four years. It began with the Islamist terrorist attack of March 2004 and ended with the assassination carried out by the ETA shortly before the recent elections. During that time, *crispación* became an issue in society: Spain's population is polarized and divided. Josep Antoni Duran i Lleida even talks

about a continuation of the historical 'two Spains' which had been opposing each other fiercely not only during the civil war.

Mr Zapatero was first elected mainly in protest against the amateurish reaction of the Aznar government to the terror of March 11, 2004. Since then, he has been trying to do the opposite of everything the government of his predecessor stood for. This change of course became blatantly obvious in antiterror policy, with Mr Zapatero and the PSOE endeavouring to bring Basque nationalist terrorism to an end by signing a peace agreement with the ETA. That this course had failed was revealed by a deadly attack in Barajas late in 2006, during the ceasefire. Considerably expanding Catalonia's autonomous status, the government threw over the course of the PP even in territorial policy. As a result, the PP accused the leadership of jeopardizing Spain's unity by boosting forces that were striving for autonomy. And in foreign policy, everything was turned upside down, which is why the Spanish troops were pulled out of Iraq and collaboration was sought with leaders such as Mr Chávez and Mr Castro in Latin America. Another new course was adopted in the social sector, where homosexual marriage was introduced against the sharp protest of the Catholic Church, and preimplantation genetic diagnosis was legalized. In educational policy, religious education was marginalized. Only in economic policy did the socialists hold on to the stable budget law which had earlier been implemented by the Populares.

For the conservatives, the preceding legislative period was a difficult time with a large number of setbacks. Their defeat of March 2004 was probably brought on through their own fault. Mr Aznar's and the PP's policy vis-à-vis Iran moved Spain into the cross-hairs of Islamist terrorism. The wall the Populares had sought to breach for the last four years did not give way. Now, in his second term of office, it is Mr Zapatero's task to build bridges and stop deepening the rifts within Spanish society. The former and current prime minister did find conciliating words, but the fact that almost all ministers were confirmed in office does not indicate a new beginning but shows that he is holding on to his old course. According to commentators, Mr Zapatero has already missed his first opportunity to demonstrate his willingness to enter into dialogue. Another question would be how the head of government intends to rule the country with such a slight majority – whether through a stable alliance still to be formed, or with the support of changing majorities. Forming an alliance with the Christian democratic, liberal CiU and turning away from the ERC and the IU, both left of the PSOE, would certainly give his policy a centrist aura.

The government's success will largely depend on whether it can keep the rolling boat of Spain's economy on course. Another challenge is the potential of the ETA, as further murders are to be expected. Much would be gained if

the government and the opposition succeeded in finding a common anti-terrorism course. Having made substantial concessions to the regional governments of Catalonia and Andalusia, Mr Zapatero will now have to control any centrifugal forces he may have unleashed. The risk is certainly real that the 'historical nations', now that they have obtained new competences, might encourage other regions of the country to make rash demands for autonomy. In social policy, the dispute about the socialists' replacement of religion classes by education in the values of the state will continue.

In some of these political areas, there are as yet no signs of a content-based position of the opposition party, the PP. However, it is a fact that the next legislative period will constitute a special challenge to Spain and its young democracy. Especially Mr Zapatero, the head of government, will have to reveal what he accords priority to – developing a unified society or reshaping Spain along the lines of his favoured ideology.