



Spanish Conservatives Face Identity Crisis, Power Struggle

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(Published in Brussels Journal, April 24, 2008)

In commentary n° 953

April 28, 2008

Spanish conservatives are now in open warfare against each other as two opposing factions seek to gain control over the ideological future of the center-right Partido Popular, the main opposition party in Spain. The internal battle has been brewing for a number of years, but has become a very public affair ever since Mariano Rajoy, the party's leader, lost the [general election on March 9](#).

The fact that the winner of that election, Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, was at best a mediocre candidate, one who should have been relatively easy to defeat at the polls, has added to calls for a major reform of the PP. And adding injury to insult, the 2008 vote was a virtual replay of the previous general election in 2004, when

Zapatero defeated Rajoy by a similar margin.

Imagine, then, the surprise of many Spanish conservatives when Rajoy announced that, instead of stepping aside, he would like to stay on as leader of the PP. This has raised fears among some party insiders that they are setting themselves up for a third consecutive defeat when the next general elections come around in 2012.

The PP is built upon the foundations of what was known as the Alianza Popular, a party established in 1976 as a federation of several smaller center-right parties, some of which were holdovers from the Franco era. When today's PP was formed in 1989, its statutes defined the party as "centrist reformist". And ever

since then, the PP has been home to voters of many different ideological backgrounds: conservatives, liberals (in Spain, liberalism refers to classical liberalism, a political ideology that defends individual liberties and personal initiative, and seeks to limit the reach of government in the economic, social and cultural life), Christian democrats, reformists, centrists, etc.

In this context, few within the PP hierarchy have ever actually revealed their true ideological leanings in public. (Indeed, [a prominent PP leader](#) once famously said that the only reason he was in politics was for the money.) And herein lies the dilemma facing the PP: By trying to be something to everyone, the party has ended up being nothing much of substance. As the PP tries to build a stronger center, however, it risks losing the right. But by moving further to the right, the PP becomes vulnerable to the Socialist canard of right-wing extremism, which has been Zapatero's primary political trump card.

Because of the difficulties involved in defining an ideologically-coherent political platform that appeals to everyone on Spain's center-right, Rajoy has been unable (or unwilling) to offer a viable alternative to the relative ideological cohesion of Zapatero and the Spanish Socialists. In fact, the PP's response to its unexpected defeat in 2004 has been the relentless pursuit of a highly confrontational populist strategy that for the past four years has been merciless in its criticism of Zapatero.

But apart from disparaging the Socialists, Rajoy has not been very effective at articulating an alternative PP "vision" for Spain. For example, PP spokeswoman Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría recently announced that the PP now stands for a "defense of public health and education and an indispensable social coverage." To most observers, that formulation sounds a lot more like Socialism than it does Conservatism.

Some party insiders argue that this is where the leadership factor comes into play. For example, former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar enforced strict discipline that kept the party "on message," a strategy that resulted in two consecutive election victories (his last one yielded an absolute majority in Congress). Unity is, in fact, one of the biggest strategic advantages the PP has enjoyed over its Socialist opponents.

Conservatives Fractured

But that unity is now in danger of collapsing. And in a bid to maintain cohesion, Rajoy seems to be abandoning ideology altogether: Rajoy today is (in public, at least) neither a conservative nor a liberal. In fact, he recently said that: "I do not want a party that is reduced to one single ideology. I want a party that is moderate, open and integrative."

There is no doubt that many PP insiders share Rajoy's perspective. Unfortunately for the PP, however, Rajoy also lacks personal charisma, the one intangible electoral asset

that could help him compensate for his ideological vagueness by better connecting him to ordinary Spanish voters. But Rajoy insists the PP did not lose the election because of him: “If I thought that my personality complicated the triumph of the PP, I would not stand again,” he said.

Rajoy justifies his continuing as leader because both former Socialist Prime Minister Felipe González and Aznar finally came to power on the third try. Rajoy also defends his decision to stay on based on the logic that he lost the 2008 election by a smaller margin than he did in 2004. “I am going to present myself because the candidacy which I headed improved results,” he said. Indeed, the PP did gain five seats to reach 154 out of 350 deputies, although analysts attribute that to faltering nationalist parties.

If Rajoy represents one side of the internal debate about the future direction of the PP, then [Esperanza Aguirre](#), the ambitious President of the Madrid region, represents the other. Indeed, Aguirre has been at the forefront of efforts to get the PP to do an honest analysis of why it lost the March elections, and how it needs to change if it wants to have any chance at winning the elections in 2012. Rumors abound that Aguirre wants to challenge Rajoy as PP leader at the [party's next national convention](#) scheduled to be held in Valencia from June 20-22.

Aguirre, who repeatedly has called for a “renewal of the message” of the party, has some powerful supporters, including the influential

center-right [El Mundo newspaper](#), as well as the popular [COPE radio station](#), which is owned by the Catholic Church.

El Mundo, for example, has carried a series of editorials arguing that Rajoy should resign in order to give the PP a chance of returning to power. “The crude reality is that it was Zapatero who won the elections and who can govern for another four years with 169 seats, which leaves him very close to an absolute majority,” according to the veteran El Mundo editor Pedro J Ramírez. And the influential COPE radio presenter, Federico Jiménez Losantos, has gone on air asking for forgiveness for advising his listeners to vote for Rajoy in the general election.

But in [a \(shocking\) editorial](#) published well before the March elections, Ramírez called for four fundamental changes to the PP platform: 1) Stop opposing homosexual marriage; 2) Start supporting human embryo research; 3) Start supporting government-mandated civics classes; and 4) Stop opposing Zapatero's desire to negotiate with ETA, the Basque terrorist group.

Such proposals would, in effect, endorse the liberal social reforms that marked Zapatero's first four years in power. They would also exchange principle for political expediency.

According to [one analyst](#): “If the Popular Party fails to criticize the conversion of gay couples into marriages [a project designed to elimi-

nate religious legitimacy by limiting the voice of religion in society]; if it accepts as inevitable research using human beings as guinea pigs; if it places the good of its children under state control and agrees to the substitution of Christianity with a civil religion; if it chooses to present its candidacy to the 2008 elections without supporting ETA's victims and without condemning the pacts with terrorists reached by PSOE, it might be able to win the elections, as Ramírez indicates. Nevertheless, the party will not do it in name of liberalism, nor will it be able to lay claim to liberalism as such." El Mundo's support for Aguirre may thus turn out to be more beneficial to the Socialist rather than to the Conservative agenda.

Internal Power Struggle

For her part, however, Aguirre has not offered many ideas of her own, other than to say that she thinks the PP can do better and has fallen into traps set by Zapatero in the past legislature, which have resulted in the party being branded as homophobic and the heirs of the Franco dictatorship. Without providing specifics, Aguirre proposes a "central, modern, open and liberal party", which in many respects is not very different from Rajoy.

All this has led some to suspect that the infighting is less about ideology than about a behind-the-scenes power struggle. Indeed, Aguirre has

been engaged in a lengthy dispute with the popular Mayor of Madrid, Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón, over who should be the rightful heir to Rajoy.

Rajoy has responded to Aguirre's challenge by implying that she could leave the PP for the Liberal Party. This has played nicely into the hands of the Socialists, whose spokesman, José Blanco, said that Rajoy's comments were "an unheard of expression of authoritarianism." The Socialists, of course, thrive off of fear mongering, never missing an opportunity to portray the PP as radicals who want to take Spain back to the right-wing authoritarianism of the Franco period.

Zapatero, meanwhile, has just presented his new government, the first cabinet that has [more women than men](#). Of 17 ministers, nine are women. "I am very proud to be the prime minister who for the first time has made a woman defense minister," Zapatero said after being sworn in by King Juan Carlos. "Moreover, I feel very proud that there are more female ministers than male." That has played very well with Spanish voters.

Because Spain has no term limits, Zapatero and his Socialist Party could be in office for a very long time if the PP fails to get its house in order.

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