

Spain: Aznar names successor and reshuffles government

By Vicky Short
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Spain's head of government José María Aznar has finally decided to step down and give way to his chosen successor. Mariano Rajoy, the present deputy prime minister and government spokesman, will be the ruling Popular Party's (PP's) candidate for the post of prime minister at the March 2004 general elections.

Aznar had previously stated that he would not seek a third term as prime minister, but he was widely expected to break this promise when the time came due to his party's parliamentary majority. His hand has now been forced by the crisis confronting the PP after he supported the US-led invasion of Iraq against the express wishes of 90 percent of the Spanish population. His unpopularity has been compounded by the debacle of the occupation of Iraq, opposition to the sending of Spanish combat troops, and the exposure of the lies and distortions used to justify the illegal US war of aggression.

The change of faces does not signify in the least a change of policies. Aznar's intention is to step out of the foreground while remaining in control behind the scenes and ensuring his right-wing policies are continued and developed by his yes-man. Aznar has said he is not leaving by halves and that he will hand control to Rajoy, but he remains president of the conservative PP until 2005.

The speed with which Aznar announced his successor indicates the depth of his unpopularity. Rajoy was selected by Aznar on August 31, presented to the cabinet the next day, and rubber-stamped by the party executive the following day.

Before being selected as candidate for prime minister, Rajoy had resigned his post in the government in an attempt to distance himself from the conflicts and popular unrest that the remaining six months of the PP government will inevitably bring. He has, however,

pledged to the executive that he will maintain the policies of the present government in relation to foreign policy, the fight against "terrorism," immigration control, and law and order. Rajoy will also continue the economic policies pursued by Aznar that have resulted in substantial attacks upon workers' living standards.

Rajoy, 48, is an acknowledged political fixer. Nicknamed "the fire-fighter," he is said to have pulled Aznar out of several sticky situations. He is reputed to be "permeable" to others' ideas and to have no loyal supporters or mass base in the party, but no enemies either. He is also said to be weak on economic issues and foreign policy, which perhaps accounts for the unanimous endorsement from the competing factions within the PP who believe they will be able to influence him.

On Aznar's two political obsessions, the defence of the constitution against further territorial autonomy—spearheaded by Basque pressure for further independence—and Spain's alliance with the US, Rajoy is considered a safe pair of hands. A supporter of the war on Iraq, he has stated that he will continue the fight against Basque sovereignty, which the government has said will be the centre of its campaign for the general elections.

Rajoy's selection was followed by a reshuffle at the top of the government, with the aim of placating those who had lost out to Rajoy while attempting to give the government a more "moderate" appearance.

However, the conflicts between different factions will not go away, particularly under conditions where the government, together with the rest of the so-called "coalition of the willing," comes under further scrutiny over its attack on Iraq, the divisions between Europe and America intensify, and the domestic situation worsens. This is the prospect in the run-up to the

elections.

The expected successor to Aznar was Rodrigo Rato, second deputy prime minister and minister of the economy. Rato was the preferred candidate of the employers' federation. They credit him with having achieved a growth of the Spanish economy of 2.3 percent in the second quarter of 2003 while the euro zone grew only 0.4 percent. Rato has held his two posts during all the Aznar governments and has led the economic policy of the PP since 1982.

In the reshuffle, Rato was promoted to first deputy prime minister to flag up the government's supposed economic success. But Rato's name has been connected with Gescartera, a massive financial scandal that rocked Spain a few years ago, and the Madrid election scandal, involving one of his most trusted men, Romero de Tejada. Fundamentally, however, Rato lost out to Rajoy because he is not regarded as being so personally loyal to Aznar.

Another disappointed hopeful was Javier Arenas, who has also been promoted to fill the post of general vice-secretary left by Rajoy.

Jaime Mayor Oreja, the leader of the PP in the Basque country, was approached by Aznar to join the cabinet and strengthen the government. He refused, arguing that he should confront the Plan Ibarrexe (Basque sovereignty project), which will be put to vote in the Basque parliament on September 26, directly at the head of the Basque PP and not as a minister. It is the second time Mayor has rejected a ministerial post and preferred to remain involved in Basque politics. The last time was in July 2002.

The position of minister of science and technology, left vacant by Josep Pique, who is to contest the Catalan Generalitat elections in November 16, was filled by Juan Costa; and Julia García Valdecasas was given responsibility for public administration—an appointment that has been criticised by the nationalists, who accuse her of carrying on the Franco tradition of centralism and being intolerant towards Spain's regional plurality.

The coming six months will not be easy for Rajoy. Between now and the general elections next March, the PP confronts three elections, one for the postponed Madrid autonomous parliament on October 26, those for the Catalan autonomous region in November, and autonomous Andalusian region elections in March, the

same time as the general elections.

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