

POLITICS AND TERRORISM. THE MADRID ATTACKS CASE

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The political and social reaction to the attacks in Madrid that took place early morning on 11 March 2004 (11-M) is an interesting case study for this edited book. Those attacks took place three days before the general elections, in which the Partido Popular (PP) - the ruling party - lost in the general elections, despite forecasts of a landslide victory prior to 11-M. Empirical studies carried out since 11-M demonstrate that the attacks did indeed influence the vote, handing victory to the main party in the opposition, the PSOE, led by the current president of the Spanish government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero¹. And it is also the consensus of surveys conducted in Spain

It is very likely that the terrorists that planned and timed the attacks took into account the political impact of their actions. In December 2003, two documents were published on a Jihadi website, both documents analyzed the political situation in Spain following the decision made by Jose Maria Aznar over Iraq, and urged hostilities against Spanish troops in the run-up to general elections. In one of these documents, the possibility of attacks in Spain was explicitly discussed². The documents implied that the Jihadists sought to pressure the government to withdraw its troops from Iraq³. Although it is not clear that those responsible for the attacks in Madrid were aware of the documents or were in contact with its authors, it is likely that they reached a similar conclusion.

Following 11-M, speculation emerged that future attacks would be timed around general elections to wreak havoc on western governments⁴. An attack like 11-M, with similar political consequences, would give the impression that terrorists are able to intervene in the birth and death of western governments, reinvigorating the morale of the Jihadist movement.

However, 11-M possesses a complexity far beyond first impressions. A terrorist attack can strengthen governments, as in 11-S. It is also too simplistic to conclude that the PP was defeated largely as punishment for the manipulation of information of which they were accused in the hours and days post 11-M. For this reason, this chapter analyses in detail the

¹ Narciso Michavila "War, Terrorism and Elections: Electoral Impact of the Islamist Terror Attacks on Madrid", Real Instituto Elcano, Working Paper 13/2005 in <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documentos/186.asp>

² Reuven Paz, *A Message to the Spanish People: The Neglected Threat by Qa`idat al-Jihad*, Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, Prism Special Dispatches, Volume 2, Number 2 (18 March 2004) in http://e-prism.org/images/PRISM_Special_dispatch_no_2-2.pdf

³ Brynjar Lia & Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaeda Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 27, (2004), pp. 355-375.

⁴ Fred Burton, "Re-Examining the Odds of a Pre-Election Attack", October 01, 2004, <http://worldterrorismreport.stratfor.com/>

principle factors that influenced the political breakdown following the attacks. Attention will be paid to the principle factors and political circumstances around those three intense days in March (11-14) and the principle actors during the events: the government, the opposition political parties (in particular the main opposition party, the Socialist Party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE), the media, the security agencies, some social movements and the terrorists.

The main thesis advanced in this chapter is two-fold:

- 1) To understand the electoral defeat of the then ruling party, the Partido Popular (PP), one must have in mind the social agitation that existed in Spain in the weeks prior to the war on Iraq and military operations between March and April 2003. When, in the afternoon of the 11th March the first doubts in the investigation emerged concerning the authorship of the attacks, a large sector of Spanish society directly linked the attacks to the government's support of the United States over the War in Iraq and as a result, blamed Jose Maria Aznar's government for 11-M.
- 2) Both the PP and PSOE capitalised politically on the attacks on the eve of the elections. Both parties resorted to the intoxication of information, using the media and party statements to do so. Ultimately, the circumstances and the political tactics employed by the socialists favoured the party, but the sympathizers of each party were left feeling that the other had been manipulated. In this way, the game played with terrorism, in other words, playing politics with terrorism, has seriously tarnished the image of the principle political parties, indirectly prejudicing the legitimacy of the political system. The political management of the attacks has left a polemical memoir of the 2004 general elections that will be difficult to forget among the generation of Spaniards that witnessed said events.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. Firstly, the chapter will explore two key issues pivotal to any understanding of the crisis: the social and political consensus in the struggle against ETA and the massive protests over the government's support of the war in Iraq. Secondly, the chapter will describe the police investigation that evolved over the first few days, which culminated with the detention of suspected terrorist hours before the elections. It is essential to be aware of these details in a chronological fashion, so as to appreciate the political manoeuvres undertaken during this period. In the last section of the chapter the behaviour of the main actors in the crisis will be examined in detail, highlighting in particular the implications of their actions upon the political landscape in Spain.

1. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSENSUS AGAINST ETA PRIOR TO 11-M

ETA has been active in Spain for over 40 years and is responsible for almost 1,000 deaths. The anti-terrorist struggle was a political priority in both of Jose María Aznar's administrations (1996-2000 and 2000-2004). In this time, and as a result of the prior socialist government efforts, the following objectives were achieved:

- a) Political and judicial efficiency. The security services had disbanded tens of terrorist cells. Since 2000, 60% of arrests were made before cells had become active or when only one operation had been carried out by a cell. In other words, the Spanish security services had achieved a high level of intelligence on ETA, prejudicing its ability to regenerate. ETA was in a critical situation from an operational perspective and the number of victims was at its lowest in three decades. In addition, in recent years, major indentations were made to ETA's financial infrastructure. From a judicial point of view, anti-terrorist legislation had been accepted socially and by

the main political parties; together with the National Audience, a judicial organ specialized in the anti-terrorism, with proven efficiency.

- b) Political consensus. In recent years, the PP and PSOE have shared similar positions regarding a strategy against ETA. Both parties were targets of ETA, who in the 1990s assassinated various members of both parties in the Basque country and elsewhere in Spain. This political consensus culminated in the Anti-terrorist Pact in December 2000. Under the pact, both sides recognized that terrorism is a state problem and committed themselves to eliminate political and electoral confrontation between parties to end terrorism.
- c) Social consensus. In opinion polls carried out by the national Centre for Sociological Investigation (CIS) ETA is considered one of the three principle problems that affect Spanish society⁵. To this heightened social consciousness the generalized rejection of ETA should be added, although in the Basque country ETA enjoys tactical support from social sectors, particularly from the radical left, known as Abertzale (today they have a political party that garnered 150.188 votes and nine seats in the Basque parliamentary elections in July 2005). A historic moment where the general sentiment of repulsion towards ETA was manifested occurred in July 1997; when ETA kidnapped Miguel Angel Blanco, a PP councillor and threatened to kill him should the government fail to transfer ETA prisoners to prisons in the Basque Country. During two days, millions marched on the streets in protest calling for his liberation, condemning the terrorist blackmail. The march was one of the largest political and social mobilizations in Spain's history as a democracy (with widespread and favourable media coverage). The Jose María Aznar government did not cede to the terrorist's demand and Miguel Angel Blanco was assassinated. This episode intensified even further the waves of rejection towards ETA. It also strengthened social movements against ETA, like ¡Basta Ya! (That's enough!), Manos Blancas (white hands) and El foro de Ermua. The Spanish media were also united in their rejection of ETA and evaluated Aznar's anti-terrorist efficiency in a positive light.

Thus, when 11-M took place, the PP government enjoyed clear social, political and media support in its anti-terrorist struggle geared towards ETA. The anti-terrorist politics hardly featured on the electoral agenda, only to highlight the government's success. As a consequence, the first impression of 11-M was that the event would bolster support for the PP. From this miscalculation the first political manoeuvres, to be later discussed here, would emerge.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL AGITATION OVER THE WAR IN IRAQ

If in the struggle against ETA the PP had woven significant social and political success, Aznar's support of the United States over Iraq provoked the exact opposite reaction.

From late February to April 2003, Spain was witness to numerous social mobilizations against the war in Iraq and Spanish support for George W. Bush. In each of the manifestations in Madrid and Barcelona over a million marched on the streets. In other cities hundreds of thousands protested. The anti-war movement was initially led by ecological, pacifist and anti-system groups that coordinated and diffused their actions on the web (on such sites as: <<http://www.culturacontralaguerra.org/>> 'platform against the war', <<http://noalaguerra.com/>> 'No to War', <<http://nodo50.org/>> an anti-system coalition in Spain, <<http://lahaine.org/>> 'the hate'). As will be later demonstrated here, this

⁵ CIS is an official organism dependant on the Ministry of the President. The studies to which we refer can be found at: <http://www.cis.es/>.

associative subculture and its coordination via the Internet played a crucial role in the events as they unfolded following 11-M. The protest was also supported by artists, actors and student groups. The media, apart from those with close ties to the government (like the public television or the newspaper ABC) were extremely critical of the government, even more so when a cameraman from a private channel was killed accidentally by a United States tank in Baghdad. In a survey conducted by the CIS, during this time 91% of the respondents at the time were against the administration's position and according to the surveys conducted, in March 2003 the Iraq crisis was considered as the second in importance to Spain and one in five Spaniards recognized the war as one of three principle concerns.

It is convenient to highlight that the popular protest centred on Jose Maria Aznar. This explains not only the personalization of politics driven by the media but also the strong leadership role performed by Aznar. The Spanish electoral system is one of closed internal party lists; this favours internal discipline and hierarchy. In the case of the PP before 11-M, this was particularly strong. Furthermore, as in most parties there are distinct factions, and the impression of the PP as a monolithic organization was clearer here. In the weeks during social agitation, many PP members were in a difficult situation of supporting a political agenda they did not agree with so as to avoid any question of internal party division. After 11-M and the PP electoral disaster it emerged that at ministerial meetings prior to the war in Iraq there were strong tensions and the party vice president, Rodrigo Rato, confronted Aznar on the political cost of supporting the United States. The social opposition and the media were aware of the strong personalism within the Aznar administration and concentrated their criticism on this. As will be demonstrated this strong personalism was reflected back in the management of the 11-M crisis and as a consequence many personally blamed Aznar for the attacks. One of the strongest examples of this was a statement by the President of the Association of the Victims of 11-M who labelled Aznar "an inducer of the death" of her son⁶.

In the political sphere, the PP was left isolated. No party supported its posture and the socialist party attempted to court the social protest in electoral terms. In March 2003, the PP witnessed one of its lowest levels of support (21,9% of those surveyed confirmed their votes for the PP and PSOE gained its best results with 27,4%)⁷. A number of PSOE members fronted the anti-war manifestations in various cities. Overall, the attitude of the socialist party favoured its leader, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, improving his party image. Until then, his leadership was questioned within and outside his party. In these weeks, Zapatero received for the first time greater support in opinion polls over Aznar⁸.

However, as the weeks passed, social concern waned and the deterioration of the Aznar administration was reduced. In the municipal elections in May 2003, the PSOE increased its lead over the PP by 123,000 votes. However, in these elections many of the candidates are elected not on the basis of the party they represent. In June 2003, a Gallup poll gave over 3 points of advantage to the PP and Aznar over Zapatero as the most valued leader⁹. Days before the elections in 2005, the agitation had almost been completely forgotten. As already highlighted here, in a March 2003 survey by CIS one in five counted the war in Iraq as one of the three most important personal worries, a year later this proportion was reduced to

⁶ Interview by Pilar Manjón, *Mundo Obrero*, No 157, October 2004.

⁷ Narciso Michavila "War, Terrorism and Elections: Electoral Impact of the Islamist Terror Attacks on Madrid", Real Instituto Elcano, Working Paper 13/2005 in <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documentos/186.asp>

⁸ Canal Sur, 30 March 2003

⁹ Gallup, June 2003. Available at: <http://www.gallup.es/encu/opp/jun03/intro.asp>

less than 2%. The most recent CIS barometer before 11-M gave the PP an electoral advantage of over 5 points to PSOE¹⁰.

Thus, the rejection and the social mobilization against the Spanish government over its position towards the war in Iraq were interpreted in strategy by the socialists as an advantage in electoral terms. This also helps one to understand the political attacks made by the PSOE when at midday on 11-M the first doubts in the investigation emerged.

Lastly, it is convenient to highlight that the authors of the Jihadi documents mentioned at the beginning of this chapter also placed emphasis on the social mobilization provoked by the war in Iraq and the attitude of the socialist party in spring 2003. In the first of these documents the author highlights the massive following that the anti-war protest had, the opposition by the PSOE, and the leadership problems within the PSOE once the manifestations had passed and the scarce political yield said events had afforded the opposition (the document was published on a Jihadist website in December 2003, when the social and political situation in Spain had cooled down). As a consequence, the author of the document advised increasing hostilities against Spanish troops to re-introduce the Iraq war at the top of the political agenda. The conclusion reached was literally this: *We believe that the Spanish government will not support more than two or three hits, at the most, before feeling obliged to withdraw following popular pressure. If its troops remain following the hits the victory of the socialist party will be practically guaranteed (see percentages) and the withdrawal of the Spanish troops will be on listed on its electoral project*¹¹. As already highlighted here, it has not yet been established that the perpetrators of 11-M were aware of this document, but it is most likely that they reached a similar conclusion.

3. POLICE INVESTIGATION BETWEEN 11-M AND 14-M

Between 7.01 and 7.14 am on 11 March 2004, an undetermined number of terrorists (probably ten) boarded four short-distance trains (known as *Cercanías*, connecting surrounding villages to the capital). Each of the four trains had six wagons containing around 6,000 people. Upon depositing 13 rucksack explosives on the trains, the terrorists alighted at intermediary stations. This action did arouse some suspicion from surviving passengers but did not sound any alert. Between 7.37 and 7.39 am, 10 of the rucksacks exploded killing 191 and injuring almost 1,600. One of the trains exploded whilst making a stop at Atocha station, a central station in the capital. The other trains exploded on route or at secondary stations bound towards Madrid¹².

In the first meeting on 11 March between senior political leaders and leaders of the two police agencies dedicated to anti-terrorism (the Civil Guard and the National Police) also concluded that ETA was responsible for the attacks. The meeting took place between 12-1 pm. During this period, the director of the National Center for Intelligence (CNI) informed the Minister of Defence that the initial take was ETA¹³ and at 15.51 pm the CNI released a note affirming with almost all certainty ETA as the group responsible¹⁴.

This initial error over the authorship of the attacks might surprise outside observers. The attacks were simultaneous, indiscriminate and against soft targets: characteristics of Al-Qaeda. Therefore, why did the political leaders and security agencies commit such an

¹⁰ El Mundo 4 March 2004

¹¹ A translation in Spanish of the document can be found at:

<http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/materiales/docs/Hegghammer_traduc.pdf>

¹² Office of Information and Social Relations, Home Office, Spain, 11 March 2004

¹³ Ibid. p. 233.

¹⁴ Appearance of Mr Jorge Dezcallar, ex Director of the Centre National for Intelligence in the Parliamentary Commission investigating Madrid bombings, 19 July 2004.

error in judgement in their initial estimations? It is important to highlight the reasons for such assessment, especially among the anti-terrorist groups:

- a) ETA, for over 40 years, has dominated almost exclusively, killing almost a thousand.
- b) ETA used to time attacks around electoral periods and Madrid was a key target. Over 120 have been assassinated by ETA in the capital.
- c) A few days prior to 11-M the Civil Guard had detained an ETA command bound towards Madrid with 536 Kg of explosives. In the interrogation, the terrorists also spoke of a planned attack with 12 backs of dynamite early in the year against a ski station used by the royal family and senior government officials. In New Year 2003, two members of ETA placed a suitcase containing explosives on a train towards Madrid, set to explode 30 minutes later upon arrival at the Charmartin station (another major station) in Madrid. However, ETA would usually pre-warn explosions so as to cause only material damage, or to kill the police and explosive specialists. There are few cases where ETA has not pre-warned. One of these exceptions was the bombing of a large shopping centre in Barcelona in 1987, killing 21¹⁵.
- d) It is also difficult to believe that an Islamist terrorist group was capable of a multiple attack (with so many operatives, using high power explosive) against Madrid as there were no precedents to such an attack. It was believed that Jihadist networks in Spain were only logistical in character. Moreover, since 9/11 almost 70 presumed Jihadis had been arrested in Spain, leading experts to contend that the infrastructure was significantly weakened¹⁶.
- e) ETA might have undertaken a radical change in strategy, or a radical/uncontrolled branch had carried out the attack. ETA's existence had been severely threatened by police efficiency in recent years; therefore 11-M might represent a desperate decision to demonstrate its resilience. In this sense, in the first hours former declarations made by senior members of ETA were recalled. A former leader of ETA, Belén González Peñalba, warned in 1984 when ETA was geared towards negotiation that it would put 'one hundred dead on the table'. This theory was sustained by Ignacio Gracia Arregui, "Iñaki de Rentería", the major military leader of ETA since 1993 until his arrest in 2000, who affirmed that 'the more dead on the table, the better they [Spain] will negotiate'¹⁷.
- f) At a meeting of anti-terrorist specialists on 11 March, an error in communication could have contributed to the faulty analysis. A senior police official spoke to the head of the bomb unit and in the conversation the explosives was mistakenly said to be Titadyne, used by ETA. This error was soon corrected however¹⁸.

One of the first leads in the investigation was the discovery of the van used by the terrorists to transport the rucksack explosives to the one of stations. The van was stolen a week prior and was found by the police thanks to a witness at the last minute that morning. In the van, Spanish origin Goma 2 Eco was found, a type of dynamite long abandoned by ETA, detonators different to the types employed by ETA, along with a cassette tape with a

¹⁵ Office of Information and Social Relations, Home Office, Spain, *España contra el terrorismo de ETA*. Available at: <http://www.mir.es/oris/inforETA/actividad.shtm>

¹⁶ Appearance of Mariano Rayón, Chief of the Central Unit for Exterior Information of the National Police, in the Parliamentary Commission investigating 11-M, 7 July 2004.

¹⁷ *El Mundo*, 11 March 2004

¹⁸ Appearance of Díaz-Pintado, Ex-Subdirector General Operativo de la Dirección General de la Policía (former Subdirector General Operative of the General Police) in the Parliamentary Commission investigating 11-M, 8 July 2004. Available at <http://www.congreso.es/>

recording of versions of the Koran in Arabic available for purchase near mosques in Madrid¹⁹.

Thus, there were several anomalies to the investigation, suggesting that ETA was not involved. The Arabic tape was a distinctive indication but was not conclusive; it could even be a deliberate red herring. Following this find, the police opened a second avenue in the investigation, led by specialists in Islamic terrorism. According to the police investigators, all options were open²⁰. In truth however, the exclusivity of the investigation and the belief that ETA was the author of the attacks was entertained for only a few hours²¹. When the Islamic terrorist experts at CNI received word on the contents of the van, the conclusions that the attacks were the work of Jihadist groups gained greater currency. A second translation of the tape by these experts revealed that the passage of the Koran recorded on the tape was an aggressive piece, a characteristic un-noted by the first translation carried out by the police²².

Late afternoon on 11 March, another remarkable event took place, adding to the confusion. An Arab newspaper based in London published on the net a document signed by Abu Hafs al-Masri Al-Qaeda, vindicating the attacks. The document itself was not remarkable since the group claimed responsibility for attacks that were later proven false (such as the electrical blackout in the United States and Canada in August of 2003). Both UK and Spanish intelligence services questioned the credibility of the claim and even the director of the Middle East Media Research Institute, MEMRI (an Israeli institution specialized in translation and radical document analysis) doubted its veracity²³. Nevertheless, that vindication was a new indication weakening the ETA hypothesis.

Late on the 11 and 12 of March, an unexploded bomb was discovered among the belongings of the victims. The police deactivated the bomb with the use of a mobile phone as a timer. On the 12 March, several investigations were underway which led to a business, which sold the telephone sim cards used in the attacks. In the morning of 13 March, the individual who had bought the sim cards was identified as the Moroccan Jamal Zougam. This individual was already acquainted with the Spanish police for his connections to the Jihadist network led by Abu Dahdah (dismantled in November 2001 and sentenced in September 2005). That morning the investigation lent definitely towards the view that 11-M was the work of Islamists. Jamal Zougam was located and arrested within hours²⁴. Three weeks later, the tracking of the mobile phones led the investigation to an apartment in Leganés (a small town south of Madrid) where the leading members of the 11-M network were hiding out. Upon discovering the raid and encircled by police, the network committed suicide exploding the dynamite in their apartment²⁵.

4. THE POLITICAL INSTRUMENTALISATION OF 11-M

¹⁹ Appearance of Yousef Nedal Ziad, police translator, the Parliamentary Commission investigating 11-M, 25 October 2004. Available at: <http://www.congreso.es/>

²⁰ Appearance of Rafael Gómez Menor, Jefe de Brigada de la Unidad Central de Información Exterior del Cuerpo Nacional de Policía (head of the Brigade of the Central Unit of Exterior Information of the National Police), the Parliamentary Commission investigating 11-M, 25 October 2004. Available at: <http://www.congreso.es/>

²¹ Appearance of Jesús de la Morena, ex Comisario General de Información de la Policía Nacional (former General Commissioner of Information of the National Police) in the Parliamentary Commission investigating Madrid bombings, 7 July 2004. Available at: <http://www.congreso.es/>

²² Ibid.

²³ Yigal Carmon "The Alleged Al-Qa'ida Statement of Responsibility for the Madrid Bombings: Translation and Commentary", MEMRI, 12 March 2004, Available at: <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA16604>

²⁴ Information and Social Relations Office, Home Office, Spain, 13 March 2004

²⁵ Ibid, 3 April 2004

Other than being the worst terrorist massacre in Spanish history, the attacks took place three days before a general election in which the PP had held a healthy lead in surveys carried out by PSOE. Electoral victory seemed guaranteed but there were many doubts that the PP could achieve an absolute majority to form a single-party government. From the first moment, the political leaders were conscious that the attacks would affect the elections, tilting the electoral balance in one way or another. The following paragraph will now examine the actors and the strategies they employed in the manipulation of the attacks²⁶.

Before the analysis begins, it is useful to emphasize that the management of the crisis was deficient at the government level but also at the political opposition level. Events between the 11 and 14 March have marked in a negative light the Spanish political landscape and the consequences are still being felt today, as will be commented upon here in the conclusion. Most of the actors involved capitalised politically on the attacks and attempted to de-legitimize politically their adversaries; both the government and the political opposition were supported by the media in this endeavour. In addition, in the information struggle that ensued during this period, the uncertainty that abounded was abused of by both parties, using supposedly privileged information to gain authority in defence of their respective postures.

Paradoxically, the intoxication of information by chief actors was met with government transparency regarding police progress in the investigation. Although government officials affirmed later that ETA was the primary line of investigation (even when the Islamist terrorist hypothesis was gaining currency) the truth is that they made public almost in real time the latest developments of the police investigation. These new developments weakened, if not radically contradicted, its hypothesis. Nevertheless, this policy of absolute transparency- following political rationale- could have threatened the police investigation. Especially the news that they had successfully deactivated one of the bombs, since the police would now be aware of how the bombs were activated, using mobile phone sim cards. The remaining sim cards were still in use by the terrorist group. The inexperience of the terrorists prevented Jamal Zougam from fleeing or from the others realizing that the phones they were using would provide key leads for the police to locate the central nucleus of the network. Had the terrorists been more professional, the political decision to make public the news concerning the deactivated bomb could have gravely damaged the police investigation.

Thus, the analysis that is offered below provides a disappointing panorama with respect to what should have been 'state' action by the main political actors in the country. State politics demand that the participants suspend their particular interests for the general interest. This attitude prevailed from 2000 until 2004, and the Anti-terrorist Pact signed by PP and PSOE worked reasonably well. However, close proximity between the elections and the attacks and the possibility of influencing the political impact of these events was too tempting for the political actors involved.

4.1. THE GOVERNMENT

In the first instance, most Spaniards, and members of government, attributed the attacks to ETA. There were many reasons to believe ETA was to blame. Among others, the

²⁶ To study the events in a chronological manner, we have used two main books, written by journalists: José María Irujo, *El Agujero. España invadida por la Yihad*, (Madrid: Aguilar, 2005). Irujo is a journalist from *El País* (and thus with a critical eye towards PP); and Miguel Platón, *11-M. Cómo la yihad puso de rodillas a España*, (Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros, 2005). Platón was Director de Información de la Agencia de Noticias EFE (Director of Information of the News Agency EFE) during Aznar's administration and his book provides the most favourable assessment of the PP government. A graphic chronology of events between 11th and 14th march can be found on the *El Mundo* site at: <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2004/graficos/mar/s3/minuto.html>

opposition leaders (much less interested in ETA as the perpetrator) also considered ETA the author of 11-M. In fact, the first politician to blame ETA was the leader of the Socialist Party, PSOE, (and now President) José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in an interview with the radio channel COPE at 8.45 am. Minutes later, Gaspar Llamazares, leader of the United Left party (a coalition of parties linked to the old communist party) made statements to the press condemning the “nazi barbarism committed today by ETA”²⁷. At 9.30 am, Juan José Ibarretxe, president of the autonomous government in the Basque Country (of the National Basque Party, which has strained relations with the Popular Party) was the first senior figure to attribute the attack to ETA. Neither Ibarretxe nor the Basque interior official had contact with the Spanish government.

From the first moment, the focus on crisis management was political. Testimony to this is that Aznar did not summon the Delegated Commission of the Government for Situations of Crisis or the Delegated Commission of the Government for Intelligence. In their place, a species of internal cabinet was summoned at 11.00 am in the Moncloa Palace. Jorge Dezcallar, the director of the CNI was not included. It seems that Dezcallar had lost trust in Aznar’s political handling some weeks before, over the partisan use of intelligence (CNI) information by the government on an unrelated issue to the topic of this chapter²⁸. The exclusion of the National Center of Intelligence complicated the synchronicity of information and analysis on 11th March. This selective participation in the meeting is reflective of the personality-driven internal politics within the Aznar administration and the partisan character of the decision making process within.

The initial strategy employed by the government consisted in reproducing a situation similar to July 1997 when ETA kidnapped and killed Miguel Angel Blanco -an episode discussed earlier in this chapter-, which generated immense social support for the government. Should the strategy succeed, the following was likely to emerge:

- a) The PP would win the elections with an absolute majority, with a tested and efficient record of anti-terrorism;
- b) The new government would enjoy greater margins to defend any political defeat planned by the nationalist Basque party (which in recent months had initiated a independence driven political agenda);
- c) ETA and its political environment would be further isolated at a social level. The end of the terrorist organization would be more likely than ever.

In the early hours of 11 March (when the general consensus was that ETA was responsible for 11-M) the Aznar administration felt strong and led the way. It had decided to capitalise on the attacks to attain three objectives. The means employed act as testimony to this:

- a) It rejected an offer by the leader of PSOE to create a permanent commission for the Antiterrorist Pact. In this way, the government would remain the protagonist;
- b) It called for a demonstration, in which it invited other parties (but not as a joint initiative). It also adopted the slogan “With the Victims, the Constitution and to the defeat of terrorism”. The inclusion of the “Constitution” was a clear reference to Basque separatism and engendered protest from nationalist elements in Catalonia. The posture of the government was to ‘take it or leave it’. At the time, Aznar was strong and willing to lead the crisis according to established objectives.

²⁷ *El País*, 11 March 2004

²⁸ Casimiro García-Abadillo, *11-M La Venganza*, (Madrid: La Esfera de los libros, 2005), pp. 135-136.

However, when from midday onwards on 11 March the ETA hypothesis began to breakdown, overtaken by growing evidence that Islamists were responsible, the PP began to realize that if Islamists were too blame the opposition would surely establish a link to the war on Iraq. In place of a similar social reaction to the Miguel Angel Blanco killing a worse imaged scenario could materialise before the elections: the resurgence of protests that took place over the war in Iraq.

From this moment onwards, the government lost the initiative. It was conscious that it had no explanatory framework to legitimise at a social level its behaviour and thus remained with the hypothesis that ETA was responsible for 11-M, despite growing evidence otherwise²⁹. Overall, the government's attitude became reactive and inflexible.

For this reason, at several appearances by government officials the truth was given on the developments offered by the investigation, but to this data the ETA hypothesis would be applied, intoxicating the information (one should deduce that apart from evidence known to the government they counted with sensitive sources of intelligence that pointed to ETA, despite everything). This view peaked mid-day on 13 March when the Interior Minister (Home Office), Angel Acebes, repeated this argument following a question from the media³⁰. At that time, the minister was aware that, as a result of the police investigation, a Moroccan with links to Spanish Jihadist networks was about to be arrested in Madrid.

4.2. THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION

The socialist party also managed the crisis via a reduced and select cabinet with a logically political character. In the early hours, the PSOE adopted a reactive stance. They were conscious that an attack by ETA of such a magnitude would benefit the government and contribute to the PP winning the elections with an absolute majority. Thus, the only thing they could at this early stage was to call for massive electoral participation³¹ and for no one to change his or her vote. Abstention has traditionally hurt PSOE at the polls, since over 50% of Spaniards identify themselves to the left of the political spectrum³². However, the confidence that this message would turnaround the poor electoral forecast was scarce.

However, once doubts over the authorship of 11-M emerged, the PSOE supported the hypothesis that 11-M was carried out by Islamic terrorism given the government's support for the War in Iraq. This was not a new idea since Luis Rodríguez Zapatero had employed the same argument following the Casablanca attacks in May 2003 where a Spanish social centre was attacked and four Spaniards were killed³³. This was no longer a call to "not change votes" but the application of an active strategy calling for the people to punish the government via the ballot for deciding to implicate Spain in the War on Iraq. The attacks became a window of opportunity for the leaders of PSOE; with events leaning in their favour given that the connection between the attacks and the war in Iraq was a simplification that seduced many a Spaniard. Indeed, 64% of those surveyed (80% of those surveyed on the left of the political spectrum) consider that 11-M would not have occurred were it not for Aznar's government support of the US in the war on Iraq³⁴

²⁹ José Antonio Olmeda, *Fear or Falsehood? Framing The 3/11 Terrorist Attacks in Madrid And Electoral Accountability*, Real Instituto Elcano Working Paper, 5 May 2005, in http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documentos/195.asp#_edn22

³⁰ *El País*, 14 March 2004

³¹ Alberto Míguez, "La cultura política", Manuel Alcántara y Antonia Martínez, *Política y Gobierno en España*, (Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2001), pp. 449-469.

³² Miguel Platón, *11-M. Cómo la yihad puso de rodillas a España*, p. 210

³³ *El País*, 18 March 2003

³⁴ Javier Noya, "Del 11-M al 14-M: estrategia yihadista, elecciones generales y opinión pública", *Análisis Real Instituto Elcano*, No 132, 2004 in <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/562.asp>

The Socialist Party transmitted the idea that the government was lying and hiding information regards the police investigation from the Spanish people. In the application of this strategy, they also resorted to the intoxication of information. On the one hand, senior PSOE members were circulating rumours that the government was hiding information and that the police sources were feeding them privileged information that 11-M was the work of Jihadists (PSOE had for 14 years fronted the government and thus it was not unusual for it to have remaining contacts within the police force). This argument was repeated on several occasions late on the 11th until the 14th March³⁵. However, overwhelmingly the argument was supported by the media, in particular the PRISA group (linked to PSOE) that led a campaign of disinformation and aggressive rumours.

Other minority parties in the opposition like the United Left, the Basque Nationalist Party or the independent Catalanian Esquerra Republicana, signed up to the PSOE strategy. They initially blamed ETA but once doubts emerged in the investigation, they also sought to capitalise politically on the events. Beyond ideological opposition to Aznar's centre-right politics, it is traditionally in the interest of these political parties for the PP to lose a majority in Parliament. In the current minority government led by PSOE, the support of these parties becomes indispensable.

In terms of the political environment surrounding ETA, the only person that morning and early afternoon to negate the implication of ETA in 11-M was Arnaldo Otegui, spokesperson of Batasuna (the coalition and political wing of ETA). Otegui made these declarations on the radio at 10 a.m., stating that "Arab resistance", given Spanish troops in Iraq, were potentially responsible³⁶. However, Otegui was also engaging in the intoxication of information. The CNI intercepted communications between Otegui and his party members that morning and discovered that Batasuna has no credible or substantiated information over the authorship of 11-M; moreover, they displayed great preoccupation that 11-M was the work of ETA³⁷. The CNI transmitted this information to Jose María Aznar that same morning and Aznar later made public the information, gravely endangering CNI sources of information. Again, political considerations (derived from accusation and counter-accusations that the government was lying) prevailed over state sense.

4.3. SOME SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Other key actors engaged in the management of the crisis included pacifist networks, of the extreme left, and anti-globalization groups that had actively taken part in anti-war demonstrations in Spring 2003. These groups were present in the manifestations organized by the government (with a reference to ETA as the author of 11-M), celebrated on 12 March. The manifestations drew the highest number of people, testimony to the social impact of the attacks. In Madrid, 2 million protested, 1.5 million in Barcelona and in total over 11 million took part, an incredible figure given that the population in Spain stands at 40 million³⁸. The groups to which we refer represent a minority and were at the head of the protests, together with the government officials (and a large number of television cameras). These organized groups vociferously accused the government of provoking 11-M with the War on Iraq and lies. In the protests in Madrid and Barcelona, these groups attempted to attack members of the government in the first row³⁹.

On 12 March, these groups, using the same placards used in anti-war demonstrations, assembled at various PP headquarters throughout Spain (especially Madrid) and for hours

³⁵ Miguel Platón, *11-M. Cómo la yihad puso de rodillas a España*, pp. 289-290; 294.

³⁶ *El Mundo*, 11 March 2004

³⁷ Miguel Platón, *11-M. Cómo la yihad puso de rodillas a España*, p. 225

³⁸ *El País*, 13 March 2004

³⁹ *El País*, 12 March 2004

shouted their protests, labelling the government a murderer and liar. These episodes were not merely anecdotal; there are several elements relevant for analysis:

- a) Although initially they numbered only tens or hundreds, the attention they received by the press (especially PRISA) enlarged the effects of the protest; creating a 'snow ball effect' mobilizing others (the concentration of tens of people at the PP headquarters turned into a manifestation of thousands, vociferously voicing their protest down the principle avenue in Madrid towards Atocha station, where some of the explosions had taken place). This in turn transmitted the image that the government was under siege and socially isolated by the faults attributed to it by the protesters.
- b) There existed considerable interaction between the members of these minority groups, the political opposition and the press in generating this protest. The PP later accused PSOE of organizing these manifestations (under electoral law the day before elections is denominated a day of reflection and public declarations calling for votes and manifestations are prohibited). However, this *modus operandi* is common among anti-globalization activists as John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt have highlighted in their work on netwar⁴⁰ and as explained by the sociologist Manuel Castells during his appearance before the parliamentary commission investigating 11-M⁴¹. There were those within PSOE and the IU that sent SMS/text messages calling for a protest and the announcement of the protest on anti-system websites was also a key-mobilizing driver. Arguably the most decisive factor in driving the protests was the role played by the SER (radio) and Canal Plus (tv) channels, both of PRISA, in affording publicity to the mobilizations and thus considerably magnifying its outreach⁴².

4.4. THE TERRORISTS

Logically, the terrorists- both the Jihadist network and ETA- played an important role in the political management of the crisis and the electoral manipulation of the attacks.

In the afternoon of 12 March ETA released a communiqué in which it denied any involvement in 11-M. In the communiqué, ETA also took the opportunity to capitalise on the event, blaming the foreign policy pursued by the Spanish government for the attacks. The analysis was also internalized, since according to ETA, Aznar's support of Bush had as an ultimate goal support in the resolution of the Basque problem; and this strategy had proved to be an absolutely counterproductive failure. The home minister denied credence to the ETA communiqué; which in retrospect was a gigantic information error because the communiqué was true. As already highlighted, the government grew increasingly inflexible and reactive as real events began to break down its hypothesis.

The Jihadists also attempted to directly intervene in the post-attack events. It is possible that the abandoned van containing explosives and an Arabic tape was considered as a re-vindication for the attacks. This, at least, was the interpretation of some analysts within CNI⁴³. Whether or not this was the motive of the Jihadists, it was soon demonstrated that the re-vindication was not explicit enough. As a consequence, in the afternoon of 13 March

⁴⁰ John Arquilla, David Ronfeldt (editors) *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001). Available at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1382/>

⁴¹ Appearance of Manuel Castells, in the Parliamentary Commission investigating 11-M, 14 July 2004 Available at: <http://www.congreso.es/>

⁴² Miguel Platón, *11-M. Cómo la yihad puso de rodillas a España*, p. 378-387. News coverage offered by SER that day can be heard at: http://www.cadenaser.com/static/especiales/2005/sonidos11_14/dia13.html

⁴³ Appearance of Mr Jorge Dezcallar, ex Director of the Centre National for Intelligence in the Parliamentary Commission investigating Madrid bombings, 19 July 2004.

the Jihadists recorded on video a communiqué, in which a masked individual speaking in Arabic with a Moroccan accent assumed responsibility for the attacks, under the name “Abu Dujan al Afgani, spokesperson of Al Qaeda in Europe”. The Spanish military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan was cited as a key motivating factor for 11-M. The individual in the video was dressed with mortises (which the CNI considered a sign that the individual was a suicide terrorist) and threatened further attacks. The video reached government hands at the last hour on 13 March and its translation was emitted on television during a home office press conference at 0.30am on 14th March.

The political re-vindication by the terrorists, just hours before the general election, is a significant indicator that the attacks sought to influence the elections.

4.5. THE PRESS

The media was a crucial element in the development of the crisis and quite possibly in its breakdown. Initially, key media elements attributed 11-M to ETA, and following the onslaught of information and the unanimous rejection of the Basque organization, a reproduction of events in 1997 (when Miguel Angel Blanco was killed) was considered imminent. Had the ETA hypothesis been confirmed, it is likely that the media would have indirectly or directly to the electoral victory, and its absolute majority, of the PP. The government attempted to maintain this situation at all cost, and when Arnaldo Otegui (representing the political wing of ETA) denied ETA involvement, Jose Maria Aznar personally called the directors of the main media organization to discredit Otegi and confirm that all indicators from the investigation pointed towards ETA.

However, midday on 11 March, when the van was discovered and the ETA hypothesis began to unravel, the media adopted different attitudes, according to the ideology of its editorial line. Many kept both hypothesis- ETA and Islamic terrorism- open whilst doubts emerged in the investigation. This sector of the media limited their activity to transmitting information every few hours when updated by government press conferences, reporting witness statements, covering acts of mourning and anti-terrorism manifestations.

The public sectors of the media supported the government line. This position became increasingly difficult to justify as ETA’s role in 11-M rapidly lost currency. For example, the public television in Madrid change its programme and on the evening of 12 and 13 March emitted a film which addressed in detail two killings committed by ETA. The same film was projected again the next day on national public television, again as a change to the original programme schedule. This move was almost grotesque, since by then it was public knowledge that Moroccans were in custody and thousands labelled the government a liar. Probably the gravest misuse of communication means by the media was carried out the news agency EFE (also public) in the afternoon of 13 March. By then, the Moroccans were under arrest and the home office was set to make an announcement to this effect in a few hours. According to EFE, the CNI had confirmed that ETA was the main line of investigation and the role of Al Qaeda in the attacks had been dismissed; thereby distorting prior comments made by the director of the CNI.

Those elements of the media close to PSOE joined up to the strategy promoted by the opposition. As highlighted above, this strategy consisted in relating the attacks to the War in Iraq, accusing the government of lying, and resuscitating a popular anti-government mobilization similar to that of Spring 2003.

The most active and decisive in promoting this strategy included *El País* newspaper and radio SER, both part of the PRISA group, close to PSOE⁴⁴ and a leading force in the media industry. *El País* is the bestselling national newspaper, with great influence among the

⁴⁴ Manuel Trenzado and Juan Núñez, “Los medios de comunicación”, Manuel Alcántara y Antonia Martínez, *Política y Gobierno en España*, (Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2001), pp. 493-530

intellectual elite. The radio SER has the largest audience in Spain. As soon as doubts over the authorship emerged on 11 March, that evening at 10.00 pm SER announced that the body of a suicide bomber had been found among the dead. SER announced that three anti-terrorist sources had confirmed the report even though it was denied by the Home Office⁴⁵. This story ran until the morning, when it was finally proven to be false. The newspaper, *El País*, in the morning of 12 March called for political responsibility from the government should 11-M be the work of Al Qaeda or an alliance of Al-Qaeda and ETA, given Aznar's support for the war in Iraq⁴⁶. During 13 March, SER covered and magnified the manifestations before PP headquarters and continued to accuse the government of lying. Even at the last hour, SER circulated the rumour that the government was going to call the election off. The story was false. Moreover, SER stated that it knew of the existence of a video by Jihadists re-vindicating the attacks since the morning of 13 March. This was false since the video in question was recorded in the afternoon of 13 March. Thus, even the media close to PSOE engaged in the intoxication of information, in an even more aggressive sense.

It is useful to take into account the informative impact that radio has in these circumstances. In the absence of images, the radio offers information and opinion in real time. It is of note that according to surveys carried out by the media, the population consider the radio more objective than the television and thus enjoys greater confidence among the public. Of all the chains of radio, SER had the highest number of listeners during this period⁴⁷. For that reason its influence on the events was very relevant.

CONCLUSION

The election took place on 14 March, three days after 11-M. The PP failed to secure government, defeated by the Socialist Party. Analysis on the influence of the attacks on the elections (based on pre and post electoral questionnaires, the evolution of votes, the votes by post and absent votes cast before the attacks) demonstrates that the attacks in Madrid incensed a minority of the electorate strong enough to change forecasted results. Concretely, the attacks in Madrid activated the vote of over 950.000 Spaniards that would have otherwise not voted and changed the vote of 700.000⁴⁸.

Beyond the fact that the attacks and the deficient political management of the crisis influenced the electoral results, there are several conclusions that one should highlight at the end of this chapter.

Firstly, the terrorists found themselves with exceptional social and political circumstances in Spain, because of Iraq, and were able to take advantage of this situation. The attacks did not provoke all the effects analyzed in this chapter simply because there were only three days between the attacks and the general elections, but because there were pre-established conditions which favoured the outcome. Had the Spanish government not supported in such a transparent manner the United States and an attack of similar proportion taken place (France was on the verge of suffering a massacre early 2001 in Strasburg at the hands of the Meliani cell⁴⁹) it is very possible that the Aznar government would have enjoyed unanimous social support, as if ETA were responsible, given its ability to counter terrorism.

⁴⁵ The story can be heard at: http://www.cadenaser.com/static/especiales/2005/sonidos11_14/dia11.html

⁴⁶ *El País*, 12 March 2004

⁴⁷ José Antonio Olmeda, *Fear or Falsehood? Framing The 3/11 Terrorist Attacks in Madrid And Electoral Accountability*

⁴⁸ Narciso Michavila "War, Terrorism and Elections: Electoral Impact of the Islamist Terror Attacks on Madrid".

⁴⁹ Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda. Global Network of Terror*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 130

Beyond that, the proximity of the elections allowed the key actors to instrumentalize the attacks, and motivated an egotistical short-term cost-benefit analysis by the government and the opposition. This had an extremely negative effect on the political system in general. The primacy of partisan interests over the general interest (what has been denominated as 'sense of state') meant that the crisis was managed in a deficient manner by all key actors involved. This lack of 'sense of state' manifested itself, for example, in the way information on the investigation from the security services was treated. We have already highlighted here that the government placed in danger several valuable sources of information and provided information that could have been used by the terrorists to frustrate the police investigation and avoid capture. Fortunately, the terrorists were not professional enough to take advantage of this situation. However, the principal manifestation of this lack of state sense consisted in that the principal actors centered their efforts during the crisis in gaining politically out of the attacks, above all other considerations.

Ultimately, this attitude tarnished the image of the principle political parties. For some, the government lied and for others the PSOE manipulated and stole, unjustly, victory from the PP⁵⁰. Together, this transmitted the impression that the political representatives and officials (both in the government and opposition) were not in control of events, for many confirming prejudices that politicians' care more about partisan interests than the general interest. For this reason, events from 11-14 March echo, with growing clarity, bitter, if not shameful, memories. Overall, the case represents a disappointing image with respect to what could have been a leading positive example of the behaviours of political institutions following a tragedy of such a magnitude.

In the months that followed the attacks, the consequences of the political manipulation of the crisis continue to affect political life in Spain. During the parliamentary commission that investigated 11-M that ended in June 2005, the political parties dedicated most of their efforts to de-legitimising their political adversaries rather than searching for means to support the security services so as to avoid another similar attack. For its role, those sectors of the media with clear political ties have continued a campaign to de-legitimise opponents regarding the attacks in Madrid. Thus, the ultimate conclusion of events post-11-M is that those that play politics with terrorism are very likely to witness their legitimacy undermined.

⁵⁰ Miguel Platón, *11-M. Cómo la yihad puso de rodillas a España*, p. 420-1