

Spain's opposition

## Unpopular party

MADRID

**Mariano Rajoy finds it hard to regain support for the People's Party**

THE legacy that Spain's former prime minister, José María Aznar, hoped to leave behind when he stepped down was a strong and united People's Party (PP), still in government. The terrorist attacks on Madrid trains that killed 191 people on March 11th, three days before the election, compounded by Mr Aznar's crude attempt to blame the Basque terrorist group, ETA, put an end to that. The centre-right PP was voted out. Worse, it has since been riven by in-fighting.

The party has struggled to deal both with its loss of power and with the inscrutable style of its new leader, Mariano Rajoy. The wrought-iron party discipline forged by Mr Aznar has corroded. In Galicia the 81-year-old former Franco-era minister and PP founder, Manuel Fraga, has had to face down a rebellion by party factions in Orense. More trouble came when seven regional MPs were expelled from the party in Guadalajara for criticising the new party leadership. Squabbles have broken out in Valencia, Castile La Mancha, Aragón, Asturias and even in the Moroccan enclave of Ceuta.

The PP's gloomy fortunes and its low poll ratings stand in marked contrast to those of the new government. So far, six months under the Socialist prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, have been about warm mood music and "good feeling". Most Spaniards approve strongly both of Mr Zapatero's withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq and of his raft of social reforms. Only recently have some concerns begun to surface in the party about the government's anti-Americanism, its over-zealous promises to stop a shipyard closure and its failure to respond to Spain's housing shortage.

A recent poll in *El Mundo* gave the Socialists a lead of almost seven points over the PP, almost two more points than it achieved in the elections. Over half of Spaniards have a very good or good opinion of Mr Zapatero; less than 15% see his government negatively. In contrast, a poll in *El País* at the end of September said that only 36% of Spaniards, and only just over half of the PP's own voters, consider Mr Rajoy to be the best man to lead the party. Madrid's mayor, Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón, and Rodrigo Rato, now head of the IMF, were both more popular choices.

Mr Aznar's great achievement was to unite the Spanish right and cast off its historic Francoist mantle. His undoing was

caused, in part, by his arrogance. At the party's annual conference at the beginning of October Mr Ruiz-Gallardón conceded this, saying "we should recognise it, we must have done something wrong." The mishandling of the *Prestige* oil spill, the support for the war in Iraq, the media manipulation which included ignoring a national one-day strike as well as being seen to lie about the Madrid bombings were all doubtless in his mind.

Spain is a predominantly left-of-centre country, and Mr Rajoy has yet to find a formula to unlock more support from the centre. He has, however, toned down the harsh rhetoric of Mr Aznar. One gesture to modernise the PP was to strike the word "Christian" from its statutes, but this was met with howls by Roman Catholics. All the same, Mr Rajoy's more-to-life-than-politics approach (smoking cigars, watching sport) is slowly winning support.

Yet just after the party conference, Mr Ruiz-Gallardón put up his deputy, Manuel Cobo, to run against Madrid's regional pre-



**Aznar's unlucky legate**

mier, Esperanza Aguirre, for Madrid's party presidency. He was slapped down by the party leadership, leaving Mr Cobo to resign and lament the "Taliban policies" and "moral lynching" of the PP. Mr Rajoy has much to do to complete the process of consolidation—let alone regain power. ■