



Spain's new government

Waking up to reality

MADRID

After his heady installation as Spain's new prime minister, the hard work for José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero is just beginning

“AND now to work, to fulfil commitments, to honour my word.” Thus José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, on becoming Spain's fifth prime minister since the restoration of democracy after Franco's death in 1975. It was three days after Islamist terrorists struck in the Madrid train-bombings on March 11th that Mr Zapatero's Socialist Party won a surprise election victory; but, with just 164 seats, it was 12 short of an absolute majority in the Cortes, Spain's parliament. Last week, however, Mr Zapatero won parliamentary backing as head of a minority government by 183 votes to 148 (with 19 abstentions).

Mr Zapatero secured the support of 19 non-Socialist deputies, mainly from radical Catalan nationalists and the hard left. The mainstream Catalan nationalists and the Basque Nationalist Party abstained. But even such a loose alliance with nationalist groups that want greater autonomy from Madrid prompted a warning from the leader of the opposition People's Party, Mariano Rajoy, that this was “a weak and unstable government”.

Yet after the stifling dogmatism of José María Aznar's People's Party government, Mr Zapatero's arrival has brought a welcome breeze of change. “I will govern for all with respect and with humility,” he said. The mantra of this 43-year-old career politician, who trained as a lawyer but has never served in any senior government

position, is “dialogue and consensus”.

In his most striking act, Mr Zapatero is to honour his campaign pledge to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. He is doing it faster than expected: within 24 hours of taking office he announced that the withdrawal would take place as soon as possible. The defence minister, José Bono, said this meant within six weeks. Why the haste? Because there was no prospect of the UN taking command in Iraq before or after June 30th (when formal sovereignty is to be handed over to an Iraqi government), said Mr Zapatero. America's George Bush rebuked him for his abruptness. Honduras, which has a small force under Spanish command in Iraq, is now also planning to withdraw its troops.

Beyond Iraq, Mr Zapatero has divulged little detail of his policy plans, but he has given strong hints of their likely direction. He has pledged to fight terrorism “in all its forms” and—perhaps to make up for the Iraqi withdrawal—to bolster the small Spanish contingent serving in Afghanistan. He wants to shift foreign policy to a more European line. He gave early backing to the draft European Union constitution. His foreign minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos, a former EU envoy to the Middle East who joined the Socialist Party only shortly before the elections, has said that the Nice treaty, which gave Spain (and Poland) disproportionately generous voting weights,

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and which Mr Aznar defended to the hilt, “is not indispensable”.

Immediately after Mr Zapatero's installation, Mr Moratinos flew to Washington to try to smooth feathers ruffled over Iraq. He is offering non-military co-operation in Iraq, and help on reconstruction. But it is not clear exactly what this will amount to. Mr Zapatero himself is making his first overseas visit as prime minister to Morocco, with which Mr Aznar's government got on notably badly.

On the domestic front

Mr Zapatero has pleased Spain's restive regions by agreeing to consider “reasonable” modifications to the constitution. He has said he will oppose the so-called Ibarretxe plan, the Basque government's proposal to hold a referendum on the right of self-determination. But Mr Zapatero's first encounter with reality in the regions may come in Catalonia, if the radical nationalists, who are in partnership with the Socialists in the regional government, do not think his constitutional modifications go far enough. As another sop he has pledged to campaign for Catalan to be made an official EU language.

Mr Zapatero has also announced something of a social revolution. His government intends to change the law of male primogeniture to allow the Spanish crown to be inherited by a woman. He will relax abortion laws and tighten legislation on domestic violence. He also plans to reduce religious instruction in state schools, and to improve gay rights. Other electoral pledges, such as making more Spanish children bilingual by sending teachers abroad for a month to learn English, and reducing housing costs for young families by providing 180,000 subsidised homes every year, may run into financial obsta- ➤

cles. But one decision popular with greens was to scrap the national hydrology plan to siphon water from the River Ebro in north-east Spain to the parched south.

In marked contrast to Felipe González, a previous Socialist prime minister who was accused of taking the party for granted, Mr Zapatero will hold a weekly meeting with party bigwigs: the wheeler-dealing Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba, who will act as a parliamentary broker, and José Blanco, who will control the party. Within the cabinet, the key minister after Mr Moratinos will be Pedro Solbes at finance. Mr Solbes held the same post in Mr Gonzalez's last Socialist government, in 1993-96. He is

credited with taking the first steps to prepare Spain's economy for the euro. As European commissioner for economic affairs, he was also a staunch defender of the euro area's stability and growth pact, which sets limits on budget deficits, so he is unlikely to be fiscally incontinent.

Mr Zapatero has promised that Spaniards' overall tax burden will not rise, but has also said that he will simplify the tax code as part of a programme to modernise the economy "so that well-being spreads to all." Mr Solbes is, however, reported to have demanded "absolute power" to run economic policy. He inherits a bullish stockmarket and a content business com-

munity. But unemployment remains the highest in the EU, at 11.2%; and there are concerns about a potential property bubble and high debts that could turn into problems if euro-area interest rates rise.

The justice ministry has gone to the academic-minded Juan Fernandez Lopez Aguilar; the interior ministry to José Antonio Alonso, a magistrate and a personal friend of Mr Zapatero, who represents Leon, the prime minister's home town. Elsewhere, Spain's traditional cronyism seems to be at work, as Mr Zapatero places party nominees and favourites into a mass of official and semi-official jobs.

It was Mr Bono's inaugural speech as defence minister that was most at odds with the consensual spirit of the new government. Mr Bono said he would be proud to die defending his country against terrorists and false patriots. He fondly remembered his Falangist father and reaffirmed his Roman Catholic credentials. He accused the opposition of a lack of testosterone for not showing up to his investiture ceremony, and he harangued regional nationalists. The 53-year-old, who had been premier of the Castile-La Mancha region ever since 1983, was promptly dubbed outmoded and a fascist by his party's Catalan nationalist allies. As euphoria and optimism grip the left, these words of Mr Bono (caught by a television microphone earlier this year calling Britain's Tony Blair a "total dickhead") provided a reminder of the tensions that may get in the way of Mr Zapatero's quiet revolution. ■