

The World: Spanish right clings to bomb theory: Evidence over train attack is flimsy but there is a determination to see a link to Eta

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NINE months after 191 people were killed by radical Islamists in the Madrid train bombings, a right-wing conspiracy theory which claims the Basque separatist group Eta must have been involved is beginning to take root.

Promoted by former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's ousted People's Party and backed by newspaper columnists and right-wing radio shows, the idea that the Islamists who planted the bombs plotted with Eta is snowballing among those upset by the Socialists' victory in a general election three days after the attacks.

'There are too many coincidences,' journalist Encarnacion Valenzuela wrote in El Mundo recently. 'There is enough to be able to affirm that Eta had something to do with the 11 March attacks.'

A series of supposedly suspicious coincidences, unanswered questions left by the police investigation and contacts between members of the Basque separatist group and Islamists in jails are the main evidence offered by those backing the conspiracy theory.

The People's Party, still stung by accusations that it misled Spaniards after the bombing - when it insisted there was 'no doubt' Eta was responsible - now claim the coincidences are too great to ignore. It has begun to talk of a 'remote-controlled' attack.

'I have not ruled out, at this stage, the intervention of Eta,' Ignacio Astarloa, Aznar's former Secretary of State for Security, told the parliamentary committee investigating the attacks.

The conspiracy theory has not convinced police, the government of Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero or numerous experts in terrorism.

They say there is no proof of involvement beyond the dozen Islamists arrested so far, the seven who blew themselves up when surrounded by police a few weeks after the attacks, their Spanish dynamite suppliers and their Islamist contacts abroad.

'I do not believe a connection exists, nor do I believe one will be shown to exist,' Judge Baltasar Garzon, Spain's leading anti-terrorist judge declared

recently.

But the denials have not stopped the radio waves and internet chatrooms filling up with speculation and accusations of a cover-up.

Revelations that police in the northern region of Asturias hid evidence that they ignored several warnings about the local explosives traffickers who sold stolen dynamite used by the bombers has, meanwhile, been taken by some as proof of a wider, more sinister cover-up.

The confrontation has reached national newspapers, with El Mundo fanning the conspiracy theory while the pro-government El Pais repeatedly tries to quash it.

'The idea that there should be further investigation to prove Eta had something to do with it makes the People's Party look ridiculous, while also making it dependent on the cloud of poison that it is inventing to cover-up its own mistakes,' El Pais commented.

Former members of Aznar's government, meanwhile, rarely lose an opportunity to remind people they still believe Eta will appear from behind the wings. 'I do not discount it at all, and less after recent evidence and the relationships we are seeing,' People's Party parliamentary spokesman Eduardo Zaplana has said.

The clues which the conspiracy theorists say point to Eta include the fact that some radical Islamists and Eta members have made friends in jail and have discussed the tactics of terror.

The fact that a vanload of Eta explosives was seized a few weeks before the attacks as it travelled a route that could have led to the Islamist bombers' hideaway near Toledo is offered as further evidence. With the explosives used in the bombings being sent to Madrid that same day from Asturias, it is argued that either the Islamists had been planning to make more bombs or that the Eta van was a smokescreen.

Eta was known to have been planning attacks in Madrid, had tried to bomb trains and was ready to use mobile phones to set bombs off, as happened with the dozen bombs that ripped through crowded commuter wagons on 11 March. It had considered planting a similar number of bombs at a ski resort used by King Juan Carlos.

The conspiracy theorists also point to a series of 'connections' between Eta, the explosives traffickers and Asturias.

A car used in an Eta bombing two years ago was stolen from the street where one of the traffickers lived. A former fellow crook had, meanwhile, claimed in a tip-off to police in Asturias before the bombings, that the traffickers were

dealing with the Basque terrorists.

Even the fact that one of the drivers of the vanload of Eta explosives carried photographs of a town 30 miles from where the explosives traffickers lived has been presented as evidence of an Eta link. 'Coincidences do not exist in the fight against terrorism,' Astarloa told a radio station.

Few experts, however, give credence to the Eta theory. Some see it as an attempt by the People's Party to muddy the waters in a vain bid to save the party's battered reputation.

'I don't see the proof. There is nothing conclusive here,' said Rogelio Alonso, a terrorism expert at Madrid's Rey Juan Carlos university.

Kepa Aulestia, a Basque political analyst, said: 'Eta is so paranoid about its own weakness that the last thing it would think of doing is getting involved with other, unknown, groups.'