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Spanish state

Zapatero: left in form, right in essence

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It should be recognised that Zapatero has been successful in his use of this “left appearance”, both within Spain and outside the country. The objective of this article is to show the most obvious contradictions between this appearance and the real policies of the Spanish government since the PSOE’s electoral victory in March 2004.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Zapatero_in_Poland__556095467_.jpg]

Zapatero with Polish prime minister Kaczyński (right)

Image: Wikimedia Commons

On May 25 the Spanish newspaper “Público” published a dossier on Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. In the dossier a cartoon showed a conversation in a café between a man of “progressive” appearance and prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero; the man says “what a disaster if Berlusconi’s example spreads across Europe!”. Zapatero responds: “yes, how can we do the same thing in a way that looks left wing?” This cartoon is a perfect illustration of the political methodology of the Spanish prime minister, confirmed by the criticisms made of Berlusconi by several of Zapatero’s ministers while Spain itself is employing a policy of increasingly tough repression of so-called “illegal immigration”.

Zapatero was elected general secretary of the PSOE in July 2000. He won a very narrow victory (41.6% of the vote against 40% for his main opponent José Bono, who subsequently became minister of defence and who is currently president of the parliament). He was until then a deputy without great implantation or influence, which finally worked in his favour: his victory was the result of an image of renovation and a skilful (and exempt of scruples: among his main allies was a corrupt current of the Madrid PSOE) playing on the internal divisions in the PSOE apparatus, in open crisis since the victory by an absolute majority of the Partido Popular (PP) led by José María Aznar at the general elections which had taken place some months before, on March 12, 2000.

Until the opening of the Iraq war, the PSOE led a fairly weak opposition in Parliament with little relationship to the social mobilisations which emerged against the increasingly right wing policies of the government; it should be said however that these mobilisations were not significant, except at certain very precise moments: in particular during the general strike of June 2002, controlled by the largest union federations, the Workers’ Commissions (CCOO) and the General Union of Workers (UGT), and in the case of the mobilisations against the oil slick after the wreck of the tanker “Prestige” off the coast of Galicia.

Zapatero took the initiative in June 2002 of negotiating with the PP a “law on parties” justified by arguments like “the struggle of democrats against terrorism”, but which has been used since then against any manifestation of dissidence in the Basque country, qualified by definition as forming part of “ETA’s periphery”. Dozens of social activists, without the least relation with the terrorist actions of ETA, have been imprisoned thanks to this law, which the PP has found useful in criticising the supposed weakness of the Zapatero government in the struggle against ETA and its “concessions” to Basque nationalism.

But the threat of a second Gulf war began to take shape and to generate an enormous opposition in Spain. The PSOE understood the depth of the rejection of the war and the possibility of strengthening the opposition to the PP government; on the other hand the massive but unstructured character of the movement meant there were no risks of it spreading out of control.

When on March 16 Aznar joined the “Azores three” alongside Bush and Blair, a month after the huge mobilisations of February 15 against the war, the rejection was very large, but it expressed more a “public opinion” than a social

movement. In these conditions, it was easy for the PSOE to be its “political expression” and the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq became the major issue for Zapatero at the general elections of March 2004.

As is well known, these elections took place in the emotional climate of the horrible massacre of March 11 in Madrid and under the effect of a public rebellion against the shameful manipulation of the facts by the PP government. An electoral majority for the PSOE signified above all the possibility of throwing the PP out of government; that is what Zapatero based his electoral victory on.

Cloudy ideology

Zapatero started from a position of weakness in the PSOE apparatus; his basic support was among the “second level” leaders without any weight in the traditional party families. For this reason he would affirm a very strong personal leadership by creating a social base of support identified, beyond the party, with his person starting from which he has succeeded in establishing his control over the apparatus in the medium term. He won this social base firstly through the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and immediately after through the different “societal” reforms (gay marriage, gender equality, law on dependency and so on) which had a big popular impact at low budgetary cost.

The control of this social base was a significant objective of Zapatero’s policy, by revitalising thus the party structures in terms of feminism, local organisations, youth organisations and so on and by seeking subordinated relations of collaboration with the world of ecology or the NGOs, through political agreements without great breadth and a skilful use of public subsidies. The institutionalisation of the big union federations, the CCOO and UGT, meant there was no point in having a specific policy towards these latter, particularly the UGT given its privileged relations with the PSOE.

Zapatero has promoted a vaporous ideology inspired by the most moderate ideologues of “republicanism”, in particular Philippe Pettit. The function of this ideology was purely ornamental, for statements and speeches; Zapatero loves the flattery of the personalities of the “neodem” media intellectual sphere (from the entourage of the US Democratic Party and in transit to the latter from European social democracy, his electoral programme for 2008 benefitted from a “committee of sages” formed by Pettit, George Lakoff, Joseph Stiglitz, Jeremy Rifkin among others, whose work seems to have mainly involved being photographed with the prime minister).

With this ideology, and still in ornamental fashion, but at the international level, Zapatero has promulgated the “alliance of civilisations” as an alternative to the “clash of civilisations” of Huntington and the US neoconservatives. The proposal, which has drawn support from the secretary general of the United Nations, Erdogan’s Turkish government, Ayatollah Khatami and Tony Blair, has generated little more than costly international meetings which have not won the expected media echo.

Finally his programme for government rests, beyond the “societal reforms”, on three pillars:

• reform of the statutes of autonomy, attempting to update the state pact arrived at during the Transition (the project has been called the “second Transition”) and in this way to form a framework for a medium term alliance between the PSOE and the Basque and Catalan nationalist parties essentially;

• the solution of the so-called “Basque conflict” by negotiation with ETA;

• the continuity of a strictly orthodox neoliberal economic policy.

Promises and realisations

To develop a critique of the main themes of Zapatero's policy would go beyond the limits of this article. But I will sum up several facts:

â€” Zapatero ordered the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq immediately after having been named prime minister. This decision has given him a capital of credibility that still brings him dividends. But this was the first and the last significant divergence of his foreign policy in relation to that of the United States. In Afghanistan or the Middle East, in Colombia or Mexico, Spanish diplomacy has acted with a strict "Atlantic discipline".

The strengthening of the political and military commitment to NATO has been accompanied by the support of numerous public funds for the arms industry, thus continuing the policy developed by the Aznar government: currently Spanish arms companies owe 26,000 million Euros to the state.

â€” On March 22, 2006, ETA announced a new truce ("permanent ceasefire"). A representation at the highest level of the government and the military organisation would lead to negotiations which had greater perspectives of success than their precedents, above all because at this time ETA was very weakened by repression in France and Spain. The government accepted significant proposals from ETA, such as the ratification by state institutions of decisions which would be taken by the autonomous institutions of the Basque county. It amounted of course to a pure negotiating tactic: without any doubt, the government, if that happened, would make a "reading" of the agreement which would have eliminated the least aspect leading to the right of self-determination of the Basque people.

In practice, the government made no significant gesture of relaxation during the negotiation process, for example, in the area of prison policy towards ETA's c. 500 prisoners. Finally, a brutal bombing by ETA at Madrid airport on December 30, 2006 interrupted the de facto truce and the perspectives of negotiations for a long period. The government has recuperated and strengthened the traditional anti-terrorist policy, very similar to that of the Aznar government, while ETA has resumed armed activity. Effectively the "Basque conflict" currently lacks a political horizon.

â€” Zapatero undertook publicly to support any proposal to reform Catalonia's statute of autonomy which would have been approved by the Catalan autonomous parliament. But the proposal for reform of the statute, approved at the end of September 2005 by a very large majority of the Catalan Parliament, was considered as "unconstitutional" and led to a political and social conflict throughout the entire Spanish state. "Anti-Catalanism", a basic component of the most reactionary Spanish nationalism, used in good part by the PP but also with significant support inside the PSOE, re-emerged. After significant changes to this draft reform, in the sense of transforming it into a purely technical change without political importance, the text was approved in Catalonia by a referendum in which less than half the electorate participated.

â€” Since then, the "second Transition" has been thrown in the dustbin and Zapatero has disputed with the PP the standard of Spanish nationalism, presenting the PSOE as "the structuring force of the unity of Spain" and as guarantor of constitutional orthodoxy faced with Catalan and Basque national demands.

â€” Some of the societal reforms carried out by the government merit support, for example the legalisation of gay marriage or the legal reforms in relation to "gender violence".

â€” But others have had more purchase in the media than in reality. For example the government has presented the law of aid to dependent persons as a "social revolution". In reality, in the best of cases, the new legislation will grant subsidies to some 40% of dependent persons, who will be responsible for 33% of service costs. On the other hand this aid will not lead to any improvement in public health services which are subject to a very serious pressure seeking privatisation, especially in the autonomous communities led by the PP.

“The economic policy of the Zapatero government has remained in the framework of neoliberal orthodoxy and has not significantly corrected Spain’s “social underdevelopment”.

The share of wages in national income reached in 2006 a historic level of 46.4% of GDP, or a fall of 3.2 points in ten years; the operating surplus increased by 0.2% to 45.1% and net taxes on production and imports, essentially borne by the workers increased by 2.9% to 11.5%. On the other hand taxation represented in 2007 41% of GDP, or four points below the European average; Spain is 15th in this area among EU countries. Despite this, Zapatero maintains a policy of tax cuts, with a specifically stupid argument: “lowering taxes is left wing”; his immediate objective is to eliminate taxes on wealth and all this at a time when according to the Bank of Spain’s “family financial survey”, the gap in average income between the poorest 20% and the richest 10% of the Spanish population went, between 2001 and 2005, from 1:12.03 to 1:17.4.

On the other hand, projects for reform of Social Security inspired by the policies of privatisation developed by the World Bank are underway. The Social Security Reserve Funds, which have accumulated a wealth of 40,334 million Euros, can now invest on the Stock Exchange, not only on the public debt as was the case until now (at a fixed rate), but also on income at a variable rate.

It is not astonishing that the 35 biggest Spanish companies registered profits of 24,508 million Euros in the first quarter of 2007, or 34% more than during the first six months of the previous year. Between 1999 and 2006 Spanish companies increased their net profit by 73%, or more than double the EU average (the EU of 15, that is without the new members) but wage costs have increased by only 3.7%, or five times less than the EU average (18.2%). We understand better why Zapatero was the preferred candidate of Spain’s employers at the last general election.

– Returning to the initial theme of this article, it is in his immigration policy that “the management of appearances” by Zapatero is the most obvious. For example, the government is developing a policy of externalisation of frontiers with the African countries from which a very small part of the “illegal immigration”, barely 1%, originates. The firmness of the immigration policy is enveloped in the politically correct language according to the rule of appearances. Thus, Spanish naval patrols intended to block the boats which come from the African coasts receive the official name of “Noble sentinel” while the straitjackets imposed on immigrants who resist are called “immobilising restraint garments”. The subsidies to African governments to buy their services as frontier guards are called “cooperation in development”. In this respect the Zapatero government is proud of having substantially increased the quantity and quality of official development aid. It is true that there has been a considerable increase in relation to the management of the PP, but the quantitative increase, to 4,200 million Euros in 2007, should be put in relation to the subsidies to the Catholic church (5,060 million Euros) and the money the immigrants remit to their countries (more than 8,000 million Euros). The qualitative improvements are limited to certain aspects (contributions to the non financial international institutions of the United Nations system, subsidies to certain NGOs and so on) while the processes of integration of private enterprises in the management of cooperation funds thanks to the “public-private alliances” is strengthened.

Strengths and weaknesses of Zapatero

In conclusion, three factors have contributed decisively to support the action of the Zapatero government since 2004:

“A prolonged period of strong economic growth, of the order of 3.5% per year, based on a dizzying growth of the property sector and massive indebtedness in mortgage credits; more than 70% of Spanish families devote more than 40% of their income to the payment of mortgage credits on their housing, But the economic crisis is already seriously affecting this growth. The effects of it will be considerable and very dangerous without a social and political response.

â€” The aggressiveness of the opposition of the PP, supported by the hierarchy of the Catholic church and powerful press groups, frequently expressed by massive social mobilisations in which the presence of the far right and a renascent social Francoism has been obvious. Fear in the face of the PP's threats, in particular of its possible return to government, was an important card in Zapatero's hands. But after its electoral defeat, the PP has entered a very deep crisis; in these conditions, its threatening character is weakened and thus also the use the PSOE can make of it.

â€” The concrete absence of a left parliamentary opposition, given that Izquierda unida [1] has simply been a lobby, politically subordinated to the PSOE, constituted of professional politicians without political influence or social credibility, at the mercy of the socialist establishment. But after the elections IU has gone into a terminal crisis. Perhaps it can maintain a weak institutional presence in certain Parliaments and municipalities, but neither it nor its currents will have any significant social influence.

In these conditions a fourth factor can play a much more important role than in the preceding stage. It should be recognised that the Zapatero government has benefitted from the weakness of the social movements and organisations and the alternative left, which has no longer had an autonomous significant existence since the failure of the unification between the MC and LCR [2], more than 15 years ago.

In accepting the fact that the point of departure of the social movements and the alternative left is very modest, is it possible that a joint revitalisation, because it can only take that form, would have a significant short term influence on the anaemic political situation in Spain?

I think that one can reasonably hope that in the not too distant future the efforts and experiences already gone through â€” among other organisations and currents by Espacio alternativo â€” raise this possibility.

[1] Izquierda unida (IU, United Left) was founded in 1986 as the electoral alliance of the Spanish Communist Party and several small left groups. At the 2008 elections it obtained only 3.8% of the vote and 2 deputies

[2] The Movimiento comunista (MC), of Maoist origin, et la Liga comunista revolucionaria (LCR, section of the Fourth International), fused in 1991 but split a year later. The current identifying with the Fourth International joined Izquierda unida, organising an anti-capitalist pole, "Espacio alternativo" and continuing publication of the review "Viento Sur".