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Following Attacks, Spain's Governing Party Is Beaten

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

MADRID, March 14 Spain's opposition Socialists swept to an upset victory in general elections on Sunday, ousting the center-right party of Prime Minister José María Aznar in a groundswell of voter anger and grief over his handling of terrorist bombings in Madrid last week.

Investigators reported Sunday that there was growing evidence of involvement of Muslim fundamentalists in the attacks. They said one of five men arrested in the bombings had been linked to a suspected cell of Al Qaeda in Spain, and a Spanish antiterrorism official said several of the men had been under surveillance before the attacks.

The bombings, the deadliest terror attack in Europe since World War II, turned on its head what just a few days ago seemed to be a likely victory by Mr. Aznar's Popular Party. Some voters apparently believed that Al Qaeda had plotted the attacks to punish Mr. Aznar for supporting the Iraq war, which Spaniards overwhelmingly opposed.

With each new bit of information about the investigation into the attack came accusations that Mr. Aznar's party may have tried to suppress evidence of possible Qaeda involvement by assuming that Basque separatists were responsible.

In addition to the men who have been arrested, the Spanish authorities were investigating the possible involvement in the plot of other militant Muslims previously known to Spanish intelligence officials.

One official said investigators were examining how militants active in Spain may have joined with others from abroad to carry out the attack.

The threat of terrorism became more of a reality to many in Europe. In Germany, the government held an emergency meeting of its security cabinet. Interior Minister Otto Schily said Germany was asking for an emergency gathering of European police and security officials to form what he called a "common assessment" of the terrorism danger and to "coordinate how to respond."

The Socialist victory in Spain was seen as a repudiation of Mr. Aznar, whose party has been in office for eight years, and his close bonds with President Bush. It also posed a new problem for the American-led occupation force in Iraq, where Spain has 1,300 troops, because the Socialists have said they will withdraw them in the absence of a clear United Nations mandate.

Rage at the government overshadowed Election Day. Protesters shouted "Liar!" and "Get our troops out of Iraq!" at the Popular Party candidate Mariano Rajoy, the 48-year-old

lawyer who had been expected to be Mr. Aznar's successor, as he voted at a Madrid polling station.

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the 43-year-old lawyer who will become prime minister, accepted victory at his party's campaign headquarters by asking for a moment of silence for the bombing victims.

He called for "restrained euphoria" in light of the bombings, which killed 200 people and wounded 1,500 on four commuter trains in Madrid on Thursday.

"Terror should know that it has all of us in front of it and we will conquer it," he said. "I will lead a quiet change. I will govern for all in unity. And power will not change me, I promise you that."

In his speech conceding defeat, Mr. Rajoy praised Mr. Zapatero as a "worthy opponent" and pledged that the Popular Party would be "a loyal opposition always serving the interests of Spain."

But Mr. Rajoy noted that the election had been "inexorably marked by the atrocious attack" of terrorism. Mr. Aznar, who had hand-picked Mr. Rajoy as his successor, stood solemnly at his side.

The arrest of three Moroccans and two Indians and an official announcement, just hours before the polls opened, of a videotape in which a man claimed that Al Qaeda had carried out the bombings prompted accusations that the government was lying when it claimed that the violent Basque separatist movement ETA was most likely responsible.

In November, Mr. Zapatero called for the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq after the death of seven Spanish secret service agents in an ambush. More recently, he softened his position, saying that if he won the election, he would withdraw the troops at the end of June unless a United Nations-led force took charge.

He also said during the campaign that Mr. Aznar's government had slavishly followed the United States, deepened European divisions over the war and damaged Spain's relationship with France and Germany.

The governing party "has gambled everything on its blind support for the United States, or rather the Bush administration, at the price of weakening the bond between Spain and Europe," he said in January.

According to official election figures, the Socialists won 43 percent of the vote and 164 seats in the 350-member Chamber of Deputies; the Popular Party won 38 percent of the vote and 148 seats.

Both the Popular Party and the biggest left-wing party, United Left, lost support to the Socialists. In 2000, the Popular Party won 183 seats, compared with 125 for the

Socialists.

The Socialists were short of the 176 seats to have a majority necessary to form a government, which means it must create a coalition with another party or parties.

Mr. Aznar will remain the head of government until a new government is formed, which, under complicated electoral rules and the Constitution, could take about three months.

The turnout was higher than expected. More than 77 percent of the country's 35 million eligible voters cast ballots, compared with 55 percent four years ago. In Madrid, the figure was 80 percent.

In a television appearance on Saturday night, Mr. Rajoy alienated some voters when he called spontaneous antigovernment rallies that brought thousands of people to the streets of Madrid "serious antidemocratic events that never before happened in the history of our democracy." He added, "Their aim is to influence and pressure the will of voters throughout the day of reflection."

At a polling station in Cozlada, a tight-knit working-class suburb east of Madrid where all four of the attacked trains had passed, there seemed not to be one person who did not know someone who had died.

"Our prime minister has gotten us into a terrible, completely wrong war," Vanessa Bellón, a 23-year-old preschool teacher with a piercing scar near her lower lip, said as she voted there for the United Left Party. "And because of it, I spent yesterday and today going to funerals. I am thinking of a 3-year-old child at my school who no longer has a mother."

That anger was echoed in the trendy Calle Fuencarral neighborhood of central Madrid. "We've enough of this government," said Nayra Delgado, a 31-year-old documentary filmmaker who voted for the Socialists. "It's too much. They think they are kings in this country."

At El Pozo train station, where one of the attacks occurred, the walls were covered with graffiti that read, "Aznar Killer," and "No to Terrorism." Red candles and bouquets of flowers were haphazardly arranged in tribute to the victims. Just across the street, the polling station was set up in a school, some of whose students had lost parents in the attacks.

"I certainly did not vote for the Popular Party," said a 79-year-old retired carpenter who identified himself only as Julián. "My daughter's hand was cut off, and she almost lost a part of her leg. Aznar should come here to see that, to see these people. But he did nothing for us. He did nothing for the poor. He is one who brought us to war. I went through the civil war, and the postwar. But this is worse."

A 26-year-old window frame maker, who identified himself only as David, said he had

changed his vote from Popular Party to Socialist because of the bombings and the war in Iraq. "Maybe the Socialists will get our troops out of Iraq, and Al Qaeda will forget about Spain, so we will be less frightened," he said. "A bit of us died in the train."

Addressing both Mr. Aznar and Mr. Rajoy, he said, "I tell them, come to our neighborhoods, we will tell you some things about life, about these poor people who died."

In conservative pockets of the country, people argued that stability, not change, was needed at this time of crisis. In the 12th-century, walled, hilltop city of Ávila, the hometown of St. Teresa, voters said they had cast their ballots as they always did for the Popular Party.

The election of the prime minister involved a complicated process in which voters did not vote for one candidate but for one party list of candidates for deputies in Parliament.

Voters had the choice of 28 party lists, including mainstream parties like the Popular and Socialist parties and tiny ones like the leftist Communist Party of the Peoples of Spain and the rightist Falange, which opposes immigration and supports the memory of the late dictator Franco.

There was little chance of secret ballots; lists were laid out on open tables in polling stations.

Hélène Fouquet and Dale Fuchs contributed reporting for this article.