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For Spanish Leader, War Is a Gamble

Prime Minister Defies Public and Bets on Swift Overthrow of Hussein

By Pamela Rolfe

Special to The Washington Post
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MADRID, March 19 -- Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar of Spain is making a gamble: The war in Iraq will be swift and comparatively bloodless, and when Spaniards vote in local elections in May, they will have forgiven him for supporting the war in near total disregard of public opinion.

Recent opinion polls show that 85 percent of Spain's people oppose the war, with or without U.N. authorization. Yet Aznar has been with President Bush every step of the way on Iraq, most recently at Sunday's summit in the Azores islands.

While some Spaniards see Aznar, 50, as a bold leader, braving a potentially unpopular move to do what he believes is principled duty, others dismiss him as a yes-man for Bush, playing the role in exchange for international exposure as a statesman.

Spain was second only to Britain as a U.S. ally during the diplomatic struggle over Iraq at the United Nations. Not only did Spain have one of the coveted votes on the U.N. Security Council, it actively lobbied uncommitted Council members to vote in favor of war.

The prime minister spoke to leaders of a dozen Arab countries and another half-dozen Central and South American leaders seeking support for the U.S. position at the world body.

But Spain has only a small military, and can't play much of a military role. Aznar has given the order to send 200 troops to defend Turkey, within the framework of the NATO alliance. He told parliament today that Spain will contribute no combat troops to the war, but will send about 900 personnel on a hospital ship and in units handling such jobs as mine-clearing and chemical warfare decontamination.

His moves have created tensions with traditional European allies, such as President Jacques Chirac of France, who, like Aznar, leads a right-of-center government.

Aznar defended his position last week in a live television interview, calling it a question of "international law" and his responsibility to "guarantee the security of Spaniards from any internal or external threat."

"What is expected of me?" he asked. "That I say I sacrifice Spaniards' security, the fight against terrorism, and the safety of the future -- that we can be threatened at any time by any dictator -- for a point more or less in popularity? I'm not going to do it. I'm going to do what I honorably believe is the charge Spaniards have given me."

But detractors claim that aspirations of fame in international circles motivate Aznar, and that rather than defending international law, he is breaking it by shrugging off Spanish public opinion, violating the U.N. charter and going to war without the Security Council's approval.

Political analyst Alberto Moncada said it's the "imperial dream" that draws Aznar to support the United States. "He wants to have his picture taken with Bush. We're a small country, and it's a sentimental question. It's really very childish."

Bush and Aznar, both young and right of center, have been close since Bush came to office in 2001. Bush made Spain his first stop on a tour of Europe that year, and last month Aznar visited Bush's ranch in Texas.

The Bush administration has formally declared the Basque separatist group ETA a terrorist organization. Aznar has said the United States has pledged logistical support in the fight against the group.

Spanish analysts see little political payback from the United States for the support on Iraq, however. Aznar's new role in the spotlight as a mediator in the Middle East peace process -- last weekend he invited Mahmoud Abbas, who today accepted the post of Palestinian prime minister, to visit Spain -- is widely seen here as made possible by Bush.

Last weekend, hundreds of thousands of citizens throughout Spain poured into the streets to protest the government's position. It was the second such demonstration in a month. Chants of "Aznar, resign" and "Aznar, traitor to Europe" rang out during the synchronized protests.

Jose Saramago, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature, spoke at a weekend protest, telling the crowd: "They want war, but we're not going to leave them in peace. . . . Worldwide global public opinion against the war has become a power that the powers to be will have to reckon with."

Wrote Spain's largest daily, El Pais, in an editorial Monday: "Aznar serves as an extra in this unilateral journey toward war."

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Protesters with signs reading "No to the War" demonstrate outside parliament in Madrid Tuesday. Opinion polls show 85 percent of Spaniards oppose the war. (Paul White -- AP)

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Aznar has declared that he will serve only two terms as prime minister and is due shortly to name his successor as leader of the Popular Party. As the demonstrations continue, analysts are watching to see how the government's war posture will affect the party's showing in municipal and regional elections scheduled for May 25.

For now, he has firm control. His party holds an absolute majority in parliament, meaning that Aznar can override the opposition and ignore public outcries about Iraq. His party's 183 legislators all supported his initiatives in a secret ballot this month.

He can maintain such control because under the Spanish system, legislators are not chosen by voters. Rather, people vote for parties and the parties select people to fill the seats. Aznar is a strong leader internally and opposition members say his legislators are afraid of defecting, even in a secret ballot.

Still, a national poll conducted by the Spanish radio chain Cadena Ser showed the Popular Party losing ground, with only 37 percent of those questioned saying they intend to vote for it, compared to 41 percent three months ago.

In a recent online poll conducted by the Spanish television channel Telecinco, 63 percent of those who responded said the government's position on the war with Iraq would influence their vote.

Aznar's popularity has plunged from 43 percent in January to 31 percent last week.

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