

## FORMER SPANISH PM AZNAR: SEPARATIST SYMPATHISERS POSE EXISTENTIAL THREAT

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In an interview with The Times, the former leader of the conservative Popular Party (PP) said that the political allies of Pedro Sánchez, the prime minister, “wanted to destroy the national system” and that his government had damaged the country’s institutions.

“I believe that the time in which we are living is an existential moment for Spain and that we face very grave risks if this coalition government continues, as it would exact such a great cost in terms of the stability of the country that a change is absolutely fundamental,” he said. He stated that the most direct threat to Spain was that the government, if re-elected, would allow Basque and Catalan separatists to hold independence referendums, a claim which Sánchez has repeatedly denied.

Aznar said that his party, now led by Alberto Feijóo, had shown in May’s local and regional elections that it was capable of obtaining enough votes on Sunday to govern alone. “The political change in Spain will produce a majority Popular Party government, free to undo the pernicious effects of the Sánchez years and to construct a political project much more in accordance with the times.”

The former prime minister, who served two terms between 1996 and 2004, has participated at election rallies in a campaign blighted by deepening political polarisation and rancour. Sánchez called the snap election after the Socialists were trounced in May’s elections, mainly over their alliances with far-left and separatist parties such as Bildu, the former political wing of Eta, the now-defunct Basque terrorist group.

Sánchez has struggled to capitalise on his government’s relative economic successes and to counter the right’s attacks against “sanchismo”, which it characterises as the prime minister’s alleged lies, his controversial alliances and autocratic style of leadership.

The final opinion polls before the election suggest the PP is well ahead of the ruling Socialists, but will need the support of Vox to govern. The most likely outcome is that the PP and Vox will obtain the necessary 176 seats in the 350-seat lower house to form a government. However, some polls show the two parties falling short, which would give the Socialists a chance to form a government because they have more options to create alliances with smaller parties.

Sánchez has branded the PP and Vox, which govern three of Spain’s regions and 140 of its municipalities in coalition, an “extreme right-wing tandem”. However, Aznar, a former tax inspector who survived an assassination attempt by Eta in 1995, was scathing about Sánchez’s government. “The problem is that this coalition government has no international precedent. It’s a coalition of radical socialists, communists supported by separatists and former terrorists, those who want to destroy the constitution and the national system,” he said. “It has caused institutional damage, economic damage and damage to the structure of the country.”

- Alberto Feijóo: I don’t need Vox’s help to run Spain

Although the left warns that a PP-Vox government would turn back the clock and pose a danger to equality, laws against gender violence, climate change legislation and LGBT rights, Aznar

insisted that the PP would govern without the hard right. “People do not want extremists in the government, nor to depend on separatists or former terrorists. They want a modern, open and moderate politics that means opportunities for the country,” he said.

Vox is led by Santiago Abascal, 47, a career politician from the Basque country, and was formed in 2013 by former PP members in protest at the party’s compliance with the European Court of Human Rights’ instruction to release convicted Basque terrorists.

Its popularity soared following its attacks on a failed independence bid by the pro-separatist Catalan regional government in 2017, and it became Spain’s third largest parliamentary party at elections in 2019. It has consolidated its support by opposing Sánchez’s pardoning of jailed separatist Catalan leaders and the deals he struck with their parties.

Aznar called on Vox voters to return to the PP fold, claiming that the party’s leadership was “more concerned with consolidating their political project than a triumph of an alternative government”. He warned that voting for them would endanger Spain as it risked failing to bring about a change in the ruling party. “This is not what the majority of Spaniards want,” he added. “Vox voters have to be very conscious that the only possible vote that guarantees that this would not happen is to vote for the Popular Party.”

He also warned that a PP government would not tolerate Vox’s plans to recentralise Spain’s highly devolved regions, which he characterised as threat to one of the key pacts that underpinned the transition to democracy after the death of the dictator General Franco in 1975. “The pact demands loyalty to Spain in return for the recognition of the plurality constituted in the Spanish nation,” he said. “Any attempt to break the constitutional system, or national unity or harmony, will receive a suitable response.”

Alberto Feijóo, the leader of the PP, will be a “serious and moderate political leader”, according to Aznar

Aznar’s concern for preservation of the legacy of Spain’s democratic transition and the need for a stable government has been echoed by Felipe González, 81, his Socialist predecessor as prime minister, who served from 1982 to 1996. His call for whichever party that wins the election to be allowed by the opposition to govern alone, without troublesome coalition partners, has irked Sánchez’s camp.

But the reliance of Sánchez on Bildu has caused profound unease among many Socialist voters. “Bildu is not a democratic party and it cannot be allowed to have influence on Spain’s government,” said Aznar. “It is made up of former terrorists, whose leader is known for having been a member of kidnap commandos and for justifying the terrorist acts of Eta. It’s not a personal question, it’s a political one.”

Commenting on a call by Isabel Ayuso, the PP head of the Madrid region, to ban the party, he added: “We must study all the possibilities but former terrorists should not be allowed on electoral lists.”

Aznar’s critics contend that his zero-tolerance approach to separatists was partially responsible for their radicalisation and that his alliance with a conservative Catalan nationalist party strengthened the pro-independence movement.

His dismissed the charges, as well as claims that Sánchez’s pardoning of jailed Catalan separatists and his abolishment of the crime of sedition had pacified the region. “I believe it has been Spanish justice and the rule of law that has pacified Catalonia,” he said. “What Sánchez has done is absolutely unacceptable. He has legislated to favour those involved in a coup d’état and not legislated to protect those who defended the constitution.”

Aznar, admired by many on the right who believe he preserved Spain's unity by governing with *mano dura* — a firm hand — is widely credited with overseeing a period of prosperity and global economic expansion during his time in office. He frowns on Spain's high debt of above 100 per cent and deficit of 4.8 per cent of GDP. However, he rejected a need for austerity, which critics of the PP said worsened the effects of the 2008 economic crisis when it was in power, instead calling for prudence.

“We have to ‘set our house in order’, to use a classic Winston Churchill phrase,” he added. “Spain has always done well when it has controlled its deficits, its debts and established a balanced budget. The waste of the left, of the Socialists and left-wing populists is not the best for a country's progress.”

He called for a return to bipartidism, which he said had brought good years to Spain. Commenting on the rise and fall of the centre-right Ciudadanos and hard-left Podemos parties, he said: “They have come and gone having brought nothing, neither stability nor progress.

Endorsing Feijóo as “a serious and moderate political leader who understands the challenges in the historic moment in which he lives”, he concluded: “I'm confident not only that he will be prime minister but a good one.”