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Zapatero's 'softness' has a backbone

By Renwick McLean

MADRID: The day after the congressional elections in the United States last month, Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain confided to some friends his take on the Democratic Party's success.

"It's becoming clear to people that what we did on Iraq was not cowardice or appeasement," he said, according to one friend, who described the conversation on condition of anonymity. "The American people are saying what we said three years ago."

If there is a charge that riles the almost preternaturally composed Zapatero, it is that he yielded to terrorism in pulling Spanish troops from Iraq after the Madrid train bombings on March 11, 2004, which shook the nation just three days before his surprise election as prime minister.

But as he moves toward the final year of his first term, his friends and aides say that he has never regretted the decision, rooted in his belief that Iraq was an illegal war, and that it inspired him to press forward with a new brand of leftist politics that has already

broadly reshaped Spanish life.

Zapatero's philosophy, rooted in what he calls Citizen Socialism, is based on near pacifism in foreign policy, expanding civil rights, and a preference for following rather than guiding the will of the people.

It values compromise and negotiation over hard stands and confrontation, and he has used this approach to push Spain to the left with an abruptness that even critics find impressive, especially considering that his Social-

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of governance

David and Paul

Zapatero displays his strength in 'soft power'

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ist Party lacks a majority in Parliament, nor is there even a formal governing coalition.

Under Zapatero, Spain has become one of the world's most liberal countries on social issues like gay marriage, eliminating all legal distinctions between same-sex and heterosexual unions. It has diluted longstanding ties between the state and the Catholic Church, and it has expanded women's rights and their access to power in a society that traditionally restricted them. Women run half of the government's ministries, one of the highest percentages in the world.

Zapatero's commitment to "soft power" has led to tentative advances on some of Spain's most intractable issues, including a pledge in March from the militant Basque separatist group ETA to honor a permanent cease-fire in exchange for dialogue with the government in Madrid. Madrid also has agreed to hold talks with the Basque regional government, which insists on considerably more autonomy.

Like Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, Zapatero is a liberal who largely leaves the economy alone, and he benefits from the strong economy, now in its second straight decade of solid growth.

Few dispute that Zapatero, 46, has brought rapid change to the political landscape here. The question is whether Spain was ready for it. Many of Zapatero's policies have opened deep rifts in Spanish society, leading his political opponents, and even some members of his own party, to contend he is swinging the country too far to the left, too fast.

Spain leans decidedly left of center, more so than in any other country in Europe, according to self-assessment surveys.

But Spain also has a young democracy that in many ways is still grappling with the divisive legacy of a dictatorship that ended only 30 years ago, and it has a history of splitting into hostile ideological camps.

In such a climate, Zapatero's critics revile him, arguing that he has an obligation to avoid polarizing agendas and to govern less from the left than public opinion might warrant.

"It's probably the great mistake of Za-



Finbarr O'Reilly/Reuters

Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain, left, preparing to review a Senegalese honor guard in Dakar on Tuesday.

patero that will go down in the history books," said Ignacio Astarloa, one of the most influential members of the center-right Popular Party, the main opposition group in Parliament. "He's destroying the consensus that we have created during the democracy."

Previous Socialist Party governments tended to adopt moderate agendas designed to avert the polarization of the past, and to preserve the social cohesion that was painstakingly cultivated during the transition to democracy after the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975.

Zapatero dared to gamble that Spanish society is now stable enough and its democracy advanced enough to handle the rough and tumble of majority rule, and the liberal agenda that is likely to come with it.

It is a significant wager by a politician who loves to make a deal but does not hesitate to offend.

"Zapatero takes for granted issues that many people, particularly the older generations, still worry about," said Emilio Lamo de Espinosa, a founder of the Elcano Royal Institute, a public policy research organization. He said that Zapatero, who came up through Socialist Party ranks, acquired political maturity when democracy was already established in Spain, and so, "he takes democracy for granted, and he takes social and political stability in Spain for granted."

Zapatero has therefore been willing

to openly defy the Catholic Church, considered a bedrock of society by the right, with bills legalizing gay marriage and making divorces easier to get. He has ignored warnings that he will stoke past grievances with a legislative package condemning Franco's dictatorship and honoring its opponents, taking sides in a conflict long considered too divisive for the government to address.

He is unusually attentive to the pub-

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lic will, even locally. Conservatives argue bitterly that he is flirting with the disintegration of Spain by being open to more self-government for the regions of Catalonia and the Basque country, whose separatist leanings have roiled national politics in the decades since democracy began here.

"Zapatero is governing with half of Spain, but against almost the entire other half," said Lamo de Espinosa.

But Zapatero rejects suggestions that he should temper his approach.

"When people say he's going too fast, he says, 'go ask gay couples or other groups who have been denied their

rights if I'm going too fast,'" said Fernando Moraleda, Zapatero's communications director.

Zapatero has described himself as enamored of democracy, comparing his first taste of it as a teenager in 1978 to a love affair. After he became prime minister, he told Time Magazine that he was more interested in being a good democrat than a great leader.

"He is not a leftist," said one friend, who spoke about him on condition of anonymity. "He is a radical democrat."

But in governance, Zapatero can be too willing to compromise, say his detractors, who contend he is tempted to cede the interests of the state in order to clinch a deal.

He bent to terrorists by offering dialogue with ETA in exchange for a permanent cease-fire, these critics say, noting that more than 800 people have died in decades of separatist violence in the Basque region. They also complain of his negotiations early this year that gave greater autonomy to Catalonia.

While Zapatero, faces a number of challenges from illegal immigration to demands for autonomy, recent history suggests that Spanish governments are hard to dislodge from power in the absence of major crises or scandals, particularly governments that lean to the left. "Even if Spaniards are unhappy with the policies of Zapatero," said Lamo de Espinosa of the Elcano Institute, "it doesn't mean they will prefer the opposition."