

# Madrid and Moscow: polls apart

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FOR once, George W. Bush must have gazed at Moscow with envy in his eyes, wishing that his own re-election was half as assured as that of his friend in the Kremlin. Even before polling began on Sunday in the Russian presidential election, about the only question that remained to be settled concerned the precise size of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin's landslide. That's just the sort of democracy the Bushies appreciate: risk-free.

A Russian voter offered a witty take on the contrast to a *Guardian* correspondent. "We have a joke here," he said. "In America, you find out who wins the elections two months after they've finished. In Russia, we know two months beforehand."

Or almost: Putin faced one more imponderable — the size of the turnout. In the United States, the proportion of registered voters exercising their franchise does not matter; in fact, it is not unknown for people who are entitled to vote being prevented from doing so if it is suspected they are going to make a "wrong" choice. In Russia, the entire electoral exercise is rendered invalid if the level of participation falls below 50 per cent.

Hence, the reports of bribes — haircut vouchers for pensioners, cinema tickets for young voters, cheap groceries for everyone — as well as coercion. With Putin's popularity rating in the region of 70 per cent, there was little danger of a larger turnout tilting the balance against

## WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

war demonstrations in Europe in February 2003 — and it's likely that last Thursday's victims included scores of peace marchers.

That irony may well be lost on the bombers, if they were indeed extremists extracting revenge for Spain's unpopular foreign policy. But then, what right have we to expect fundamentalists to be logical or reasonable? They stand, above all, for death and destruction — much like the government of the US, which must be hoping that investigators will exonerate Al Qaeda in this instance, because a different verdict would serve only to underline the shortcomings of the "war against

way, Jose" response to Aznar, and they marked their ballots accordingly. And in so doing, they have offered up an important example of how western democracy can work, notwithstanding its limitations.

Would an atrocity on a similar scale in Moscow have delivered a comparable shock to the Russian system? Not likely. Putin did not, of course, make the same mistake as Aznar: his government, for reasons of its own, unequivocally opposed the Iraq war, echoing the feelings of most Russians. It has been suggested that even if France had chickened out, Russia's representative at the United Nations Security Council would have vetoed any resolution that sought to authorize aggression.

At the same time, however, Putin — unlike Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder — went out of his way to avoid annoying his friend in the White House. And, soon after Iraq had been ravaged for the second time in a

dozen years, he kissed and made up with Bush and Blair. Which helps to explain why the US has been surprisingly sanguine about Moscow's stance on Iraq. Besides, let's not forget that in the wake of September 11, 2001, Putin raised no objection to the establishment of US military bases in the countries that once made up Soviet Central Asia.

However, Iraq played no part in the Russian presidential election campaign. In fact, the incumbent refused to campaign at all in any conventional manner. He couldn't even be bothered to come up with a manifesto, claiming that his record spoke for itself. Which it certainly did through saturation coverage, all of it laudatory, the electronic media.

Although the past week's dramatic events in Spain could be construed as an instance of Al Qaeda or one of its offshoots profoundly influencing politics in a European nation, they also point to another equally fascinating phenomenon. Which is that Spaniards have by and large reacted to the huge tragedy thrust upon them with an encouraging degree of maturity.

the incumbent. In the event, initial results showed him winning about 69 per cent of the vote on a turnout of 64 per cent.

Although Russia is far from immune to terror and tragedy, it went to the polls without the pall of gloom that hung over Spain's general election on the same day, in the wake of last Thursday's horrendous train bombings in Madrid that claimed the lives of 200 commuters. Moscow's underground suffered a similar attack on a smaller scale last year, which was blamed on Chechen separatists. It wasn't an implausible charge in the light of Moscow's experiences and the brutal military campaign to crush Chechen aspirations — plus the fact that Chechnya reportedly became a magnet for Islamic extremists fleeing Afghanistan in the wake of the US invasion.

A bigger question mark hangs over the Madrid atrocities, which the outgoing government of Jose Maria Aznar was quick to blame on the Basque separatist group ETA. Since then there have been unverified claims of Al Qaeda involvement, plus a certain amount of circumstantial evidence pointing in the same direction. The identity of the culprits does not, of course, affect the nature of what was a callous and calculated act of mass murder. It's worth noting, though, that although ETA's reputation for terrorism is well deserved, it has traditionally picked military or political targets, often preferring assassination to the big bang. Besides, it has nothing to gain from being perceived as the perpetrator of an outrage on this scale.

Al Qaeda — or any brand of fundamentalists identifying with it — does not ostensibly have anything to gain either. The claims of responsibility that initially surfaced suggested that Madrid commuters had been killed indiscriminately because of Spain's support for the invasion of Iraq. But the fact is that Spain did not back the war. Although Aznar was stupid enough to obsequiously line up behind Bush and Tony Blair, he did so even though a phenomenal 90 per cent of his compatriots opposed the aggression. Madrid witnessed one of the largest anti-

terror". Numerologists, meanwhile, must be puzzling over the fact that the deadly events of March 11 occurred exactly 911 days after 9/11.

Aznar's People's party regime is the first government to have received its comeuppance at the ballot box after conniving in the assault on Iraq a year ago this week. In transferring their gaze from Moscow to Madrid, the primary emotion of the Bushies must have switched from envy to fear. And that nervousness must extend to their closest comrades-in-arms, Blair and Australia's John Howard.

The carnage in Madrid appears to have given large numbers of Spaniards a reason to vote — and, more pertinently, a reason to vote against the party in power. Not only did they hold Aznar indirectly responsible for the bloodshed, they were equally upset by the perception that the government was engaged in an elaborate cover-up, with state media disinclined to accord the terrorist attack the importance it obviously deserved, and official spokesmen relentlessly implicating ETA.

The Socialist Party's Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero had pledged during his campaign to pull Spanish troops out of Iraq by June 30, as well as to reverse Aznar's policy of kowtowing to Washington by returning to Madrid's alliance with Paris and Berlin. On Monday the prime minister-designate reiterated his pullout pledge.

Although the past week's dramatic events in Spain could be construed as an instance of Al Qaeda or one of its offshoots profoundly influencing politics in a European nation (although it could be weeks, if not months, before responsibility for the bombs can conclusively be determined), they also point to another equally fascinating phenomenon. Which is that Spaniards have by and large reacted to the huge tragedy thrust upon them with an encouraging degree of maturity. It is not unusual in such circumstances for cowed and bewildered electorates to keep faith with the incumbents. But a majority of Spanish voters decided that the humiliation and hurt they had suffered called for a "no

president's challengers (at least a couple of whom appeared to be unstinting Putin loyalists) received almost no coverage at all.

In a country as large and unwieldy as Russia, television plays a crucial role as a source of information. And the image it projects of a benign and charismatic ruler combating conglomerates and corruption and taking on terrorists tends to seep into the popular consciousness. This isn't a novel phenomenon in Russia: the tsar was often deified by those who suffered most under feudalism, just as Josef Stalin's victims often assumed that their leader couldn't possibly be aware of their fate.

In the same way, many of those who voted for Putin on Sunday did so not because they have benefited from his rule or because the state of affairs in Russia fills them with pride. They did so because they feel their woes have thus far escaped his attention, but will eventually be tackled. And some of them did so because they simply didn't know who else to vote for. (For what it's worth, the Communist Party candidate came second with nearly 15 per cent, despite predictions that he wouldn't attract more than two per cent of the vote.)

Putin has sought, with some success, to distance himself from the appalling legacy of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. The pre-emptory sacking of the prime minister and his cabinet last month is seen as part of an ongoing purge of Yeltsin loyalists — and their replacement in most cases with Putin loyalists, including the president's former KGB colleagues. Similarly, his actions against certain billionaires are part of a drive to ensure that capitalist Russia's oligarchs know which side their bread is buttered.

Russian democracy has never really recovered from the battering it received at Yeltsin's hands 11 years ago, and Sunday's election will not reinforce its reputation. On the other hand, a compelling case could be made for the proposition that Spain has come a long way since the death of Francisco Franco in 1975 ended nearly four years of fascist dictatorship.

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