

# The Ides of March: Political Crisis, Media Crisis?

**Joan Botella**

- *"In the Roman Republic, the Ides of March celebrated the god Mars; tradition has it that the revolt against Julius Caesar took place on that date"*

The events that occurred in Spain between 11 and 14 March 2004 will be the subject of analysis and study from many perspectives in the future. Directly relating the bombings at the Madrid stations to the mass mobilisation that followed them, the electoral reorientation at the polls and the political redefinition it led to raises many questions about essential issues from homeland security through to Spain's international policy, the impact the bombings had on the elections and the features of public opinion in our country.

Among these essential questions, one of the main ones will be measuring the role and effective weight played by the processes involved in preparing and disseminating information over the time of the crisis. (I am deliberately not using the word 'media' here, because one of the key elements during those days, as I will argue later, was in fact the abolition of the linear model of uni-directional or 'stimulus/response' influence from the media to the public).

The articles contained in this issue of *Quaderns del CAC* explore in detail the way the media acted following the attacks of 11 March. In this article, I will focus on two questions that are closely linked but distinguishable in intellectual and analytical terms: the process of building a *shared psychological story* (and its immediate political consequences) and the existence or absence of *politically neutral spaces* in a democratic society.

---

**Joan Botella**

*Board Member of the Catalonia Broadcasting Council*

We may have forgotten it now, but society's perceptions were fluctuating considerably over those four days in March, in time with the 'inputs' received by the public. People do not often remember that the first authority to make a pronouncement on 11 March, at an improvised press conference at 9.30 a.m., was the Basque regional leader, Ibarretxe, who condemned the bombings and stressed that the claims of the Basque people could not be defended through violence. In other words, it was exactly the stereotyped discourse that comprises the standard response from Basque nationalists to actions by ETA. The inference was unmistakable: the Basque Government was (without actually saying so) attributing the bombings to ETA.

Such an interpretation was not implausible: just a few months earlier a van had been stopped on a highway in Cuenca, heading in the direction of Madrid and carrying a significant amount of explosives. There was speculation about an attack being repeated in a large public area of the city, similar to the bombing at Callao Square a few months earlier. In fact, this hypothesis was so plausible that at 10 a.m. on 11 March, the top-rating Catalan radio station broadcast a live interview with Josep Lluís Carod-Rovira, during which, at one point, the interviewer asked, "Will you dare to go to the funerals?"

The key element of what happened over those four days in March may possibly be the psychological reconstruction, on the part of millions of citizens, of the events, their interpretations, and, in particular, the successive versions that were being given. The question raised at the demonstrations was "Who was it?" which led from the initial interest and anxiety through to the moral deauthorisation of the person who was concealing information on the group responsible for the bombings. Independently of what the formal judicial investigations and results of the parliamentary investigative committee may have turned up,

the Spanish public quickly formed a verdict: there may have been doubts about who was behind the bombings, but there was no doubt that the Spanish Government was pointing in a different direction to the one overwhelmingly indicated by a multitude of clues. The existence of a wide range of media was decisive, as people turned to the Internet and foreign press (again!) for information. However, there were no rumours or those waves of half-truths that sometimes take hold amongst the public.

Neither was there any aggressive or violent action against Muslim communities established in Spain, nor any calls for vengeance, wildly patriotic demonstrations, flag raisings or similar displays. The public's reaction was first and foremost one of solidarity with the victims and their families and, secondly, based around a single question ("Who was it?"). When the answers they received differed from the evidence, the questions turned to indignation.

Did the bombings impact the elections? Undoubtedly, they did. But let us take another look at the question. What people very often mean to ask is whether the bombings and the events that followed them upset voting preferences and transformed a foreseeable victory for the PP into a socialist success. What is the answer to that question?

With a few small fluctuations, the different pre-election surveys had shown that the PP was ahead of the PSOE, although its lead had been getting smaller throughout 2003. The enormous change in the political environment with respect to the previous parliamentary session (where an extraordinarily favourable economic situation had coincided with a relative majority for the PP which had led, whether they wanted it or not, to an understanding with the regional nationalists) had led to a situation in which the PP had found itself without any possible coalition partners. As such, the party's electoral challenge was to win an absolute majority, as it seemed to be unlikely it would be able to salvage relations with any other political force (except possibly the Coalición Canaria). This was the point on which the pre-election surveys were unable to give a clear prediction: it was taken for read that the PP would win, but what was not clear was the margin of victory. Would it romp home with a big enough majority to allow it to rule alone? These were the speculations around the latest surveys, published on 7 and 8 March.

The size of these uncertainties was considerable. Firstly,

the changes in leadership at the different political parties had led to the appearance of new faces at the top of most of the lists of candidates, both in Spain (Rajoy, Rodríguez Zapatero and Llamazares) and Catalonia (Montilla, Puigcercós and Herrera), with uncertainties about how attractive each would be. In fact, during the last stage of the PP government, Aznar acted as if he was in election mode, assuming responsibility for the whole of the previous political period without leaving any clear ground for a candidate with a more 'likeable' image, such as Rajoy.

Secondly, although mass demonstrations do not necessarily have to impact election results (because across-the-board demonstrations affect all the different electorates in a similar fashion), the public uproar about Spain's participation in the war in Iraq had a strong impact on the public's awareness and led to demonstrations on a scale that had very rarely (if ever) been seen before.

In this context, the municipal elections of May 2003 had recorded a number of ambiguous results. Of course, the PP presented the result as a victory, as it held onto all its important positions and made significant symbolic gains (such as recapturing the Government of the Balearic Islands). The only socialist victory, the possible coalition of left-wing parties to form the Government of the Community of Madrid, was frustrated a few days later by two socialist MPs who crossed the floor.

However, in addition, and for the first time in any elections since 1993, the PSOE won more votes than the PP. For the first time, despite winning both Madrid City and the Community of Madrid, the PP had failed to win an absolute majority. Likewise, it was said that despite the *Prestige* disaster, the PP had continued picking up city councils along the Galician coast, including in Muxia, where the 'black tide' was the most pronounced. What was not often mentioned was that in Muxia its vote had fallen from 78% to 51%.

In other words, if we were to track the results of the 2003 municipal and regional elections in detail, we would see a number of cracks in the bases of support of the PP electorate.

Similarly, in the period during the run-up to the March 2004 elections, the PP's superiority in terms of voting intentions was accompanied by a set of indicators that showed the fragility of this prediction. To give just one example, the

Opina Institute detected (in a survey carried out between 27 February and 1 March on a sample of  $n = 4,000$ ) that the PP was the preferred choice of 42% of possible voters, while the PSOE carried 38% of the vote. Similarly, Rajoy scored slightly higher than Rodríguez Zapatero (5.0 instead of 4.8 on a scale of 0 to 10) and, finally, nearly two-thirds of voters (65.7%) anticipated a PP victory in the elections, compared to 11.6% who thought the PSOE would win.

However, these were not the only pieces of information the survey revealed. For example, more than half the people surveyed said there was a need for a change of government (55.2%), while less than one-third (30.4%) said they wanted continuity. Very few of the people surveyed, 12%, believed Aznar's claims about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, while almost 80% did not. On the other hand, although people were keen for a change in PP leadership, this was only to a certain extent: 64.5% of the people surveyed said that Rajoy was also responsible for Spain's involvement in the war, while less than a quarter, 23.3%, said he was not.

Finally, although not very many people said the war in Iraq would influence their vote (only 37.5%), there was a clear preference for Zapatero over Rajoy: 37.6% of the people surveyed said they wanted the socialist leader to win, while only 33.8% preferred Rajoy<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, although the simplest indicators of voting intentions were favourable to the Popular Party, a host of more detailed indicators suggested a certain precariousness in this position and the existence of a number of elements that pointed in the direction of change, as well as a clear preference for Rodríguez Zapatero over Rajoy.

Of course, this does not mean that everything was decided beforehand, or that victory was sure prior to the Madrid bombings, but it does mean that the processes of the formation of public opinion and the mobilisation of new social sectors that began after 11 March took place in a context of attitudes inclined towards the hypothesis of a socialist victory (or possibly, a PP defeat).

This leads us to the second point I mentioned: the ways in which messages were disseminated over those days. In fact, a new and very important phenomenon had already been recorded the previous year: the growing presence of political messages in the non-conventional media. If we take

the day in November 2002 when the shipwreck of the *Prestige* occurred and use it as the starting point, we were witnessing across Spain an intense mobilisation of 'new' sectors, from Galician fishermen through to film personalities, who made extensive use of instruments other than the prevailing mass media. Radio, press and television fell short in front of the explosion in the number of stickers, websites, SMS messages on mobile phones and even the recovery of the old idea of 'guerrilla films' with the militant production and exhibition of a documentary about the experience of the Aznar government, called *Hay motivo (There Is A Motive)*.

This explosion in communications will have to be studied in more depth and this is not the place to do so. However, by way of hypothesis, I would dare to venture that there was a process of diminishing importance and even credibility of the dominant media, similar to the one detected in the United States during the long election process of 2004. The new media could afford to be more analytical (such as the webpages published by Professor Vicenç Navarro, from the Pompeu Fabra University) and more forceful (few slogans have been as effective as the "Nunca Mais" that followed the shipwreck of the *Prestige*). However, to go from one extreme to the other, the new media highlighted how the conventional media is too timid, lacks analytical weight and affords too much prominence to journalists. The new media that was mobilised (and which was also a mobilising force) was essentially plural, anonymous, established as a palette of instruments that each citizen could use as he or she saw fit and, in short, was to a large extent interactive and thus bi-directional. The message "Pass it on!" on the mobile phones on the night of 13 March featured all these characteristics.

Beneath this, I would like to repeat, the question raised is whether this set of phenomena constitutes a new element incorporated into the communicational landscape, or whether it is an exceptional and, in short, fleeting incident. Answering this question would require a complex investigative strategy that we are not able to develop here, but the extremely generation-specific nature of many of these phenomena at least raises the suspicion that they will not disappear easily. (In fact, the Catalan elections of November 2003, which took place in the middle of the context described above, also recorded a considerable presence of alternative communication devices and a

noticeable rise in electoral participation. The results had a markedly anti-establishment nature, with significant losses to the two main parties, CiU and PSC, and a strong growth amongst the most innovative and 'youthful' parties, ERC and IC-V.)

Thirdly, and here I am referring strictly to the situation of the candidatures, the events of March revealed a paradox. In an electoral campaign, it is understood that all candidates have the right and freedom to voice their opinions on any issue. However, the 11 March bombings led the political parties to declare the campaign over and ushered in a period of silence: any possible criticism of trying to take electoral advantage of death and suffering was enough to silence their voices. In other words, a much longer period of reflection than was usual in the run-up to an election was established.

However, the situation was asymmetrical: under the parliamentary system, the Government continued where it was, in full capacity of functions and rights<sup>ii</sup>, but at the same time it was part of the election campaign, because it was a one-party government and was fielding candidates in the elections. So although the PP stopped campaigning, the Interior Minister continued to make public appearances, call press conferences and venture hypotheses about who was behind the bombings. That is what made Mr. Rajoy's appearance on the night of Saturday 13 March, when he condemned the mass protests taking place outside the PP offices, so extraordinary, because at the time he was not a minister, but simply the head of the list of PP candidates. The problem of public order, if such a problem existed, should have been a matter for the Government. The candidates had no responsibility or powers in solving it. This identification of the party with the Government, as manifested at Rajoy's press conference, may have been a key element in the definitive shaping of public opinion.

However, if we move from the empirical to the regulatory area, it seems clear that there was a situation that will have to be better regulated in the future (and without any need, we hope, for such tragic events to happen again). The period of reflection, whether it lasts one day or three, requires *silence*. That is why the regular measures of *political pluralism* are irrelevant. In fact, they are more than irrelevant: it is not fair that there are claims from political forces demanding more presence to counter the statements

coming from the government, precisely because it is the government, not a political party, who is doing the talking.

However, it is hard to make this believable. In fact, rightly or wrongly, possible appearances by government spokespeople during periods of reflection will always be used by political forces outside the government as a justification for claiming more chances to make themselves heard. In other words, there arises a need to promote spaces and actors in the media that are credibly independent and plural in order to intervene with authority and from outside the electoral process in any important problem that may arise during these sorts of times. We lack the tradition and democratic experience that would allow us to distinguish, in governmental interventions, between a partisan interest and an institutional action. In fact, even if they have the best of intentions, opponents can always raise doubts and brand as partisan any intervention by the authorities. Obviously, this problem goes way beyond the aim of this article and so I will end here.

## Notes

- 1 The survey in question can be consulted at the following website: [www.opina.es](http://www.opina.es). The other surveys published during the weeks before the 14 March elections, and the pre-election survey from the CIS, stated similar phenomena. See: [www.cis.es](http://www.cis.es)
- 2 It is important to here mention the extraordinary fact that, the day after the Madrid bombings, the Cabinet approved the 'National Technical Plan' on local digital terrestrial television. It is not only shocking that in the context of those terrible days, the Government should expend its energy on establishing the map of local DTT multiplexes, it is also reminiscent of the awarding of licences that had taken place on the day of reflection four years earlier, the Friday before the year 2000 general elections.