

The test facing Aznar's successor

Rajoy is likely to need his skills as conciliator

The task facing Mariano Rajoy, nominated by José María Aznar to succeed him as the centre-right Popular party's candidate for prime minister in Spain's general election next March, is harder than it looks. He is likely to need all the affability and common touch with which, unlike his rather dour boss, he is credited.

On the face of it, Mr Aznar leaves a golden legacy after seven years in office. The party holds a six-point lead over the Socialists, according to a poll last week. Spain has avoided the recriminations over Iraq that have beset Britain, even though Mr Aznar defied public opinion to back the US-led war. The economy, after years of expansion and liberalisation, is still enjoying growth well above the euro-zone average.

A PP victory, though, is not assured. The Socialists, led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, won a majority of the popular vote in May's municipal and regional elections. Since then, embarrassing internal divisions have prevented their taking control of the Madrid region – where the election will be rerun next month – but they could still put up a fight next year. The PP will find it hard to repeat the absolute majority it achieved in 2000.

The changes come amid increased calls by Basque and Catalan politicians for greater autonomy. Juan José Ibarretxe, the Basque premier, will shortly put forward plans for increased sovereignty for an area comprising four Spanish regions and three Basque-

speaking French departments. Pasqual Maragall, former Socialist mayor of Barcelona and candidate for premier in Catalan regional elections in November, wants Catalonia to have greater control of justice and taxes and to participate directly in international organisations such as Unesco. Mr Rodríguez Zapatero supports greater political responsibility for regional governments, in contrast to Mr Aznar, who rejected any proposal that would alter Spain's 25-year-old constitution.

This tricky domestic agenda has persuaded Mr Aznar to favour Mr Rajoy as his successor over Rodrigo Rato, the internationally respected economy minister who was the other front-runner for the top job. Mr Rajoy, currently first deputy prime minister and government spokesman, has headed ministries including public administration, education and the interior. His reputation as a conciliator was enhanced by his masterminding of the 2000 election campaign and his role in helping Mr Aznar survive outrage over the Prestige oil tanker disaster in north-west Spain last year.

The trial for Mr Rajoy will be how far he can emerge from the shadow of Mr Aznar, who rules his party with iron discipline and will remain in office until March. The central policies of fighting terrorism, resisting more power for the regions and economic deregulation are likely to remain. But if the PP emerges from the election without a majority, Mr Rajoy's negotiating skills will be tested to the full.