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Theories About Separatist Group Muddy Terrorism Trial in Madrid

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MADRID, June 13 — For the past three months, more than two dozen defendants have been on trial in Madrid on charges that they orchestrated one of the worst terrorist attacks in Europe's recent history — the bombing of four commuter trains on March 11, 2004, which killed 191 people and wounded at least 1,800. But at many points during the trial, the courtroom has been absorbed by a sideshow — the effort by a handful of lawyers for some victims to demonstrate that [ETA](#), the armed Basque separatist group, had a part in the bombings.

The efforts to implicate ETA have muddied an already complex trial and undermined the credibility of the police and judges involved in the investigation, members of the prosecution and some victims said. The efforts also show the degree to which politics has reached into the corners of public life.

“A parallel trial has emerged, based on unfounded suspicions and preconceived ideas,” said Javier Zaragoza, the chief prosecutor, on Monday. He said the insistence by some lawyers on pursuing the ETA theory had led to “grotesque situations” in the courtroom.

That the theory linking ETA to the attacks should be a prominent feature of the trial was no surprise, legal and political analysts have said. The decision of the former government of [José María Aznar](#) to accuse ETA in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, despite evidence to the contrary, contributed to Mr. Aznar's defeat in general elections three days after the bombings.

Since then, politicians from the right in Mr. Aznar's Popular Party and some in the news media have continued to seek proof of ETA's involvement, and many Spaniards looked to the trial to provide an unequivocal version of events.

In an effort at complete openness, the trial has been transmitted live on the Internet, at [www.datadiar.com](#), and to television stations. Javier Gómez Bermúdez, the presiding judge, has been at pains to control the complicated process, which involves as many lawyers, including some for insurance companies and victims, as defendants.

But lawyers for two victims' groups have tried to prove that the type of explosives and other equipment used in the attacks were the same as those often used by ETA.

One of the groups, the Association of Victims of Terrorism, is a conservative body that mainly represents ETA's victims. The other, the Association for Assistance for Victims of 11-M, which refers to March 11, contends that ETA was involved. Although a verdict is not due for weeks, each accusation has collapsed as witnesses failed to corroborate testimony or expert witnesses dismissed ETA's involvement. But Mr. Zaragoza said the accusations had “cast a shadow of doubt over the police, the Civil Guard and the national intelligence service.”

Some victims contend that efforts to implicate ETA may have weakened the prosecution against the 28 suspects that remain of the original 29. Charges were dropped against one suspect last week.

Despite the debate, legal experts and political analysts said the lack of evidence linking ETA to the attacks was so overwhelming that the public thirst for truth would be satisfied.

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“None of what the judicial investigation has turned up fits into the delirious puzzle put together by the theoreticians,” El País, a newspaper that broadly supports the Socialist government, wrote in an editorial on Wednesday. “Is it not now time for the Popular Party, which for so long has lent credibility to this hugely irresponsible conspiracy theory, to recognize the truth?”

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