

Zapatero is tested by Basques

Claim on secession challenges Madrid

By Renwick McLean

MADRID: The Basque country's declaration last week that it has the right to secede from Spain has pushed Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero toward the first domestic crisis of his tenure, political analysts say.

Through nearly nine months in office, Zapatero has largely promoted policies that are solidly supported by the Spanish public, which has helped him to avoid major setbacks or controversies.

But critics say that his affinity for following the polls has kept him from taking on tough issues. Chief among these are the growing signs in recent months that the Basque country is moving toward an overt challenge to the central government's authority.

"Now it's time for him to respond," said an editorial in the Madrid daily *El Mundo*. "The coherence and decisiveness of his answer will determine, not only his own political future, but also the survival of the current federal model endorsed by the Spanish people."

The political principles invoked by Zapatero in his previous policy decisions offer little guidance on how he will handle this challenge, analysts say. Since taking office in April, Zapatero has stressed that the central policy of his government is to follow the will of the people. But now he finds himself staring at a possible constitutional standoff with a man making the same claim.

Juan José Ibarretxe, the president of the Basque country and the driving force behind the declaration last week, says that he is simply being a good democrat by proposing that the future of the region he governs be decided by its people and not by Madrid. As the leader of a democratic government, he says, he must follow the principle of majority rule.

Zapatero has used the same argument to fend off criticism of many of his policies, from withdrawing Spanish troops from Iraq to sanctioning gay marriage. The looming conflict between the two men in many ways reflects an age-old question about democracy. What are the rights and powers of the minority in a system based on majority rule?

The United States fought a civil war in part to resolve the question, after Southern states said that, since they had freely joined the union, they were free to leave it, regardless of what the rest of the country thought.

The situation in Spain is not nearly as dire, but the question is similar. Can the Basque country unilaterally alter its relationship with Madrid, even secede, if the majority of its people want to?

Zapatero says that the answer is clearly no, contending that the Spanish Constitution forbids it. But Ibarretxe says that at the end of the day the central government's opinion is irrelevant. If neither budges, Spain could be thrown into a genuine constitutional crisis, specialists say.

The Basque declaration was adopted by the region's Parliament last week as part of a complex plan for restructuring the constitutional statute that governs the Basque country's ties with the central government in Madrid.

In explaining the plan, Ibarretxe is often careful to point out that it does not propose outright independence from Spain. But many political analysts wonder why the Basque country would risk angering Madrid by stating that it has the right to secede if it never intends to do so. Some experts argue that Basque leaders are using talk of secession only as a threat to persuade the central government to give them greater autonomy.

In fact, many politicians, even some of Ibarretxe's allies, say that outright independence would make little sense, considering Spain's growing integration into the European Union.

"In a Europe where states are disappearing, it doesn't make sense to propose a political model that is based on an old reality," said Josu Iñaki Erkoreka, a representative of the Basque Nationalist Party in the Madrid Parliament.

Even if independence is not the goal, the Basque declaration last week demands immediate attention from Zapatero, political analysts in Madrid say.

"This is without a doubt the greatest challenge presented to the Spanish state and the democratic parties since the transition" to democracy after the death of General Francisco Franco in 1975, the editorial in *El Mundo* said.