

Basques demand break with Spain

By Leslie Crawford in Madrid

"I have come to this parliament to defend the right of the Basque people to decide their own future." With these words, Juan José Ibarretxe, leader of the Basque regional government, yesterday laid down the biggest democratic challenge to Spain's territorial integrity since the 1936-39 civil war.

Speaking in Spain's *Cortes*, the national parliament, Mr Ibarretxe defended a controversial plan to let Spain's three Basque provinces break away from the rest of country while remaining "an associated free state".

His initiative was narrowly approved in the Basque regional parliament in late December, provoking a constitutional crisis over the limits of self-government granted to Spain's 17 autonomous regions.

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain's Socialist prime minister, is facing a deluge of petitions for more self-government from other regions, although none has gone as far as the Basque country in its demands.

Mr Ibarretxe's plan introduces Basque citizenship, an independent judicial system, its own laws on political organisations, a Basque penal system, the right to sign foreign treaties with other countries and "a new political pact for co-existing with the Spanish state".

Nevertheless, it requires the approval of the Spanish *Cortes*, which was set to reject the proposed reforms to the Basque country's autonomy statutes by a wide margin yesterday.

Mr Zapatero told Mr Ibarretxe he would defend the territorial integrity of Spain. "Do not seek a clash between the legitimacy [of the Basque and Spanish] parliaments because that is a false game," the prime minister said.

Mariano Rajoy, leader of the conservative Popular party opposition, called Mr Ibarretxe's plan a "thinly veiled declaration of independence".

Knowing his project to be doomed, Mr Ibarretxe struck a defiant tone. "Euskadi [the Basque country] is not subordinate to the Spanish state. We will only remain part of Spain if we so wish," he said. Pointing to Mr Zapatero and Mr Rajoy, both of whom oppose secession, Mr Ibarretxe added: "The Basque people have come of age. You cannot take our decisions for us."

Mr Ibarretxe vowed to submit his plan to a "democratic consultation" in the Basque country even if it were rejected by Spanish legislators.

The Basque leader would be breaking the law if he did so, as the national parliament is the only body vested with the power to call referendums.

Mr Zapatero warned Mr Ibarretxe not to flout the law. Other members of Mr Zapatero's cabinet have been more explicit in outlining the government's response if Mr Ibarretxe takes his plan any further.

José Bono, defence minister, warned last week that the Basque country's self-government could be suspended and Spanish troops sent in.