

Court aids Basque bid for a state

Debate on new status is allowed by decision

By Dale Fuchs

MADRID: The Spanish Supreme Court has breathed life into a controversial, and unlikely, Basque independence plan that would turn the wealthy northern region of 2.1 million people into a loosely associated state within Spain.

The court ruled on Tuesday that parliamentary debate on the plan may go forward, rejecting the central government's claims that even such a preliminary step would violated the Spanish Constitution.

Before José María Aznar's party was defeated in elections last month, his government tried to block what he called a "secessionist plan" in its early stages, saying that it was undemocratic and legitimizes terrorism.

The plan's author, the Basque nationalist leader Juan José Ibarretxe, has justified the plan as a way to end more than three decades of violence by the separatist group ETA.

Since 1968, the group has killed more than 800 people, mostly politicians, judges, journalists and others, in its armed struggle for an independent Basque state in parts of northern Spain and southern France.

In his swearing-in debate last week, the new Socialist prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, said he would offer Basque nationalists an alternative to the radical plan, one that would not violate the constitution but would address Basques' concerns, like the promotion of their ancient language, Euskera.

The government under Aznar had broken off dialogue with Basque regional government, and the governing party had turned a perceived threat to break up Spain — both from the Basque and Catalonia regions — into the focus of the electoral campaign.

But that debate was overshadowed by the bombings that tore apart four commuter trains, killing 191 people and wounding more than 1,400 on March 11.