

Dealing with the Basques

For 35 years, ETA separatists have waged a campaign of terror to wrest an independent state for the Basques in northwest Spain. More than 800 people have been killed. The Spanish government has responded with dogged police work and, more recently, by outlawing Batasuna, the party that is widely regarded as ETA's political wing. The first strategy has been working — ETA is reported to be weaker now than it has been for years — but the ban on Batasuna only fuels extremism by disenfranchising a section of the moderate Basque electorate.

The desire to crack down on Batasuna is understandable. But so far, no direct link has been established between Batasuna and terrorist acts. There are only allegations by Parliament, which passed a law last summer designed to enable the ban, and by the investigating magistrate who suspended the party's political activities last August. When Batasuna was formally banned in March this year, its members immediately formed alternative parties. But Spain's highest court ruled almost all of them illegal in May, striking 1,500 pro-independence candidates from the lists for local elections held on May 25. Mayors of more than 60 towns and villages found themselves unable to run, and 10 percent of Basque voters — roughly the proportion who have voted for Batasuna in the past —

registered their discontent by casting spoiled ballots.

Last week, Spain's prosecutor-general laid charges against the speaker of the region's Parliament for failing to dissolve a grouping of seven former Batasuna legislators. Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar weighed in with a warning to the moderate Basque Nationalist Party, or PNV, which controls the regional assembly, not to disobey the courts.

Aznar's strategy of outlawing Batasuna has proved popular with a broad spectrum of the Spanish electorate. But the real way to undermine the ETA, as Aznar should know, is to hunt down the bombers and snipers one by one — the police say they detained 185 ETA suspects last year, and 20 since January this year — while promoting dialogue between Madrid and those who peacefully seek greater autonomy for the Basque region. The PNV last year proposed limited sovereignty, and there is ample room for compromise.

The danger now is that Aznar will respond to the PNV's opposition by suspending the regional Parliament's powers, which would help drive a new generation of Basques into the arms of ETA. Spain's government and courts should step back from their growing confrontation with moderate Basque nationalists, and limit the political ban to individuals convicted of supporting terrorist acts.