

COLUMN ONE

Road Is Lonely, Scary For Local Opponents Of Basque Nationalism

As Madrid Makes Overture to Region,
Socialist Professor Stays the Course

Radicals 'Intimidate Everybody'

By CARLTA VITZTHUM

GETXO, Spain—On a recent fall evening, Gotzone Mora and two bodyguards drove through the rolling green hills of Spain's Basque country to a rural village 90 minutes away from her home in this elegant seaside town.

The dark blue Peugeot pulled over on the village outskirts. Ms. Mora flipped on her cellphone and dialed. As a voice on the line gave directions, one of the bodyguards steered the car through the narrow streets and halted in front of an apartment building. "Now! Turn off your phone and hurry," said the voice on the phone.

As her bodyguards waited below, Ms. Mora clambered up darkened stairs. A door cracked open on the third floor, and she was ushered in. Her host handed her a large envelope and gave her a lengthy description of what was inside.

Ms. Mora isn't an underworld spy. She is a 55-year-old mother, a Socialist councilor in Getxo

city hall and a sociology professor at the University of the Basque Country. She also is the leader of a movement to halt the advance of radical Basque nationalism on campus and an outspoken critic of ETA, the terrorist organization that has killed about 830 people since it began a bloody campaign in 1968 for Basque independence from Spain. Her dream is to return freedom of speech to the thousands of Basques who fear they can't express their opinions without incurring the wrath of ETA or its radical supporters. "I want my children and grandchildren to live in a free country," she says.

The documents that Ms. Mora picked up that evening provided fresh evidence that dozens of alleged Basque terrorists had received top grades while being on the run or in jail—from professors who were either ETA sympathizers or afraid of the organization.

A group of professors won a battle last year to ban ETA convicts from taking classes at the Basque university, either via long-distance correspondence or by having professors visit them in jail. But, in an overture to Basque nationalists, Spain's new Socialist government now says it wants to lift the ban. Currently, ETA prisoners can enroll at UNED, Spain's long-distance university.

Ms. Mora has been threatened with death numerous times. One of her colleagues was murdered in 2000. Another was lucky to survive when a bomb planted by ETA failed to detonate in the university elevator she was riding. During the past four years, more than a dozen professors have left the university to take jobs elsewhere in Spain. Many of those who remain have police protection.

After the March 11 train bombings that killed 191 people in Madrid, attention in Spain has been riveted on the fight against Islamic terrorism. But despite a recent police crackdown on ETA, this region of 2.1 million people in northern Spain remains very much in turmoil. While ETA (short in the Basque language for *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*, or Basque Homeland and Freedom) shows signs of dying out, the regional Basque government is taking up its separatist cause.

Now, Ms. Mora worries the new government in Madrid is making overtures toward the Basque government—such as allowing Basque prisoners to return to the public university—that could inadvertently give a boost to ETA and other nationalists. The Madrid government is keen to patch up relations with the Basque government, which had deteriorated badly under the center-right government of former Prime Minister José María Aznar. The Basque government accused Mr. Aznar of equating

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Gotzone Mora



Road Is Scary for Critics of Basques

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nationalism with terrorism. Now, some members of Ms. Mora's Socialist Party resent her harsh criticism of nationalism—moderate as well as radical—out of fear it could stir up further tension between Madrid and the Basque government.

The festering Basque problem is part of a broader struggle that threatens the territorial integrity of Spain. Many Spanish politicians fear that the Basque separatist movement and a peaceful independence movement in Catalonia, the region that encompasses the northeast of Spain, could eventually tear the country apart, robbing the newly enlarged European Union of a growth engine and creating volatile ministates at its southern edge.

Spain's struggle with radical Basque separatism also shows the difficulty of rooting out extremism once it has taken hold in part of society. It is a problem that Europe will soon face with its growing Muslim population if radical Islam continues to make inroads among first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants. "The problem with ETA and Islamic terrorism is very similar. The new generation of radical Basques are indoctrinated by their educational system and are every day more extremist, while the Islamic radicals are indoctrinated in mosques," says a senior Spanish antiterrorism official who has investigated both movements.

In late December, the Basque Parliament will vote on a plan pushed by the ruling Basque Nationalist Party to convert the Basque country into a "free-associated state with Spain." Under the 1979 Statute of Gernika, Madrid already has devolved a broad range of administrative powers to the region, such as control over taxes, education, police, health and other services. But this plan would go further by giving the region "co-sovereignty" and paving the way for a referendum in 2005 on whether it should eventually break off from Spain.

The ruling party argues that giving Basques an increasingly greater say over their affairs is vital to eradicating ETA violence. Once the organization sees its goal of independence achieved through peaceful means, the violence will cease, the party says.

Between 30% and 35% of Basques favor independence, according to surveys carried out by an independent polling agency at the Basque university. For radical Basque nationalists, securing control of the region's public-university system is perceived as key to winning the hearts and minds of the Basque people.

In many ways, life in the Basque region has improved during the past year. Spanish and French police have arrested hundreds of ETA members. On Oct. 3, they captured ETA's two alleged political leaders during a sweep in southwestern France.

Since 2000, Spanish Judge Baltasar Garçon has outlawed ETA's political wing and a half-dozen other civil organizations with proven ties to ETA. The Madrid government also has tightened laws against street violence by radical youths in incremental steps since 2001.

The crackdown has weakened the organization and its financial network. After killing 46 people from 2000 to 2003, ETA has claimed no lives this year, and street violence has dropped sharply.

However, many nonnationalists such as Ms. Mora worry that the Basque government's new plan will further divide Basque society.

On a recent morning at the university, Ms. Mora parks her car within sight of a security guard. Earlier this year, suspected Basque radicals slashed her tires during a speech she delivered at Jaén University in southern Spain. A bodyguard discovered the damage just minutes before the car was to cross a twisty mountain pass.

Bent against the wind, Ms. Mora walks along the deserted cement paths of the public university. A bodyguard trails closely behind; another walks ahead. Two beefy security guards from the university dressed in dark-blue windbreakers approach her. There is a student protest on campus later in the day, one of the guards says. She should remain in her office until it is over, he adds.

Except for a small group of students in a corner café, the rest of the campus feels empty and desolate. "There is so little student life or intellectual debate here," Ms. Mora says, shaking her head. "The radical students are a minority, but they intimidate everybody."

At the entrance to the humanities building, a group of five, scruffy-looking gray-haired men hold up a banner in the Basque language. They taught at the university during the 1980s, but never be-

came tenured professors because they refused to take a civil-service exam before a panel of Spanish judges. Since then, they stand guard every day to protest Spain's control over the Basque university system. Sympathetic colleagues take up a monthly collection to support them.

Ms. Mora's office is on the top floor of the building, but she hasn't taken the elevator since December 2000, when a bomb planted there by suspected ETA terrorists failed to detonate, sparing one of her colleagues' lives. The elevator is located next to one of the building's main pillars. Had the bomb exploded, the building could have collapsed.

Upstairs, Ms. Mora walks down the hall to her office. "Batasuna," she says, pointing first at one office and then at another. The offices belong to two professors who are members of ETA's outlawed political wing. She gestures toward two other empty offices. "This one's gone. That one, too," she says, referring to two professors who fled the university. The office doors are made of light wood, and each has a large circular window. Ms. Mora's door is bulletproof with a triple lock and no window.

Two bodyguards take up positions outside her door. Another two wait down the hall on the landing. "With ETA and Batasuna so weak, the radicals aren't as aggressive," says a young, barrel-chested guard with spiked hair. "But no matter how weak ETA is, a middle-aged professor is still easy prey."

Two years ago during a raid, police found Ms. Mora's name on an ETA hit list. They also found photographs of her, a map of her office with a sketch of an escape route, a copy of her class schedule and a detailed description of her country home in southern France, her car and her family—information presumably provided by one of her colleagues or a student. Ms. Mora is so farsighted, an ETA informer wrote, she won't even see a gun put to her head.

Shouts can be heard from the student protest below. From her desk, Ms. Mora can see the distant wooded hills where she secretly met a colleague on a spring night in 2003. Far from prying eyes, he handed over the transcript of a convicted ETA prisoner who earned a degree while on the run from the law. The fugitive's grades were excellent, making her eligible for a job at the university. But the professor was too afraid to denounce the irregularities.

Earlier this year, Ms. Mora and her bodyguards caught a former student trying to break into her office. Only two years earlier, she had paid for the boy's studies after learning that his parents were in financial straits. "He sat right there and told me why ETA had to kill me," says Ms. Mora, who collects snapshots of the campus graffiti condemning her to death. "I had to be eliminated because I am an enemy of *Euskal Herria*"—the hypothetical nation that includes the three Basque provinces in Spain, the neighboring region of Navarre and the three Basque provinces in southern France.

For Ms. Mora's family, the past four years have been a heart-rending experience. "I hear the threatening phone calls at 4:00 in the morning, and I see how my parents no longer go out," says her 28-year-old son, Unai Urruela. His parents, he says, are increasingly alone: A majority of Basques prefer to stay clear of politics, either out of fear or indifference. For them, the Basque country offers one of the highest standards of living in Europe, and that is enough.

Still, Mr. Urruela is an unwavering supporter of his mother. As a journalism student four years ago, he studied under a radical nationalist. For the final exam, the professor asked his pupils to write on the plight of jailed ETA gunmen. "He graded us on our political beliefs, not our knowledge," Mr. Urruela says.

Ms. Mora's husband and elder son are law professors at the university. "To many people on campus, it's as if we don't exist," says Victor Urruela, Ms. Mora's husband. The anguish of seeing his wife live under threat has damaged his health, his family says.

But there are rewarding moments. Ms. Mora pulls a folder from her desk. In a youthful scrawl, a student wrote: "Got-zone. I have cried for you and I have felt terribly frustrated for remaining silent, for not banding together with my classmates and coming to your aid... but we, too, are afraid."

Another student wrote in an e-mail: "Thank you for telling us that murder makes no sense; thank you for fighting for my freedom; thank you for being on

the side of those who suffer; thank you for being there, day after day."

Ms. Mora's cellphone rings. She glances at the number. It belongs to a radical Basque journalist who requested an interview the previous week. Ms. Mora refused. But the journalist continues to phone, often insulting her when she answers. The day before, he called more than a dozen times and the bodyguard ordered her to turn off the phone. "If they have the technology, they can trace where she is," he explains later.

The next day, Ms. Mora has a council meeting at Getxo city hall, an early 20th-century stone palace perched on a grassy hill above the sea. As she climbs the steps to the regal edifice, she greets a group of young men in the garden. They are the bodyguards for the town's 12 nonnationalist councilors—nine from the center-right Popular Party and three from Ms. Mora's center-left Socialist Party. This wealthy Bilbao suburb of 30,000 people has suffered more ETA extortion, murders and kidnappings than any other town in the Basque country. None of the 11 councilors from the two nationalist parties has a bodyguard.

The meeting convenes, and Imanol Landa of the Basque Nationalist Party asks the council to approve a motion in favor of a free Basque state associated



Anti-ETA graffiti on the campus of the University of the Basque Country.

with Spain. Since democracy was restored, he says, Spain hasn't respected the will of the Basque people as enshrined in the Statute of Gernika.

The nonnationalist councilors protest. "Once again, we are witnessing a strategy that places democratic institutions at the service of a concrete ideology," says Marisa Arrue of the center-right Popular Party.

The nationalists approve the motion with the two votes of the United Left, a communist-led coalition of left-wing parties. Later in the meeting, the Socialist and Popular parties propose a motion congratulating Spain's security forces for the Oct. 3 arrests. "Thanks to that raid, we all feel freer today," Ms. Arrue says.

The motion is voted down by the nationalists and the United Left.