



Spain

Breaking up is hard to do

VITORIA

Spain's election once again throws the spotlight on its rebellious regions

JUAN MARI ARZAK, doyen among Basque chefs, disappears across his dining-room at the first mention of politics. "I do not want anything to do with it," he says. Yet Spain's political season, now in full swing, cannot but intrude. A general election on March 14th will see the retirement of José María Aznar, after eight years as prime minister—although his People's Party, under Mariano Rajoy, is on course to win again. Argument continues over more powers for Spain's regions, especially Catalonia and the Basque country. Mr Aznar declares that the constitution is under threat. Is there a risk of Spain unravelling?

The answer is probably no, but there are at least reasons to pose the question. The moderate nationalist (PNV) premier of the Basque region, Juan José Ibarretxe, still touts his plan for a referendum on self-determination. In Catalonia, a coalition government of socialists and radical nationalists formed after last November's election is demanding more autonomy—despite the forced resignation of the radical nationalists' leader, Josep Lluís Carod-Rovira, after he admitted talking to the Basque terrorist group, ETA. Others among Spain's 17 "autonomous regions" are watching: Manuel Chaves, the socialist leader of Andalusia, says he would like to renegotiate relations with Madrid.

Yet other developments point to a lowering of tensions. The nastiest form of na-

tionalism has, thankfully, quietened. Last year ETA killed only three people: excluding a 14-month ceasefire that ended in 1999, this is the smallest number since 1973. More effective co-operation with France's police and security services has helped. In December, several top ETA men were arrested in two French raids.

Also, besides the replacement of a hardline Mr Aznar by a (maybe softer) Mr Rajoy, several veterans are going. Xabier Arzalluz, a nationalist firebrand, has retired as president of the PNV after 30 years. His hatred of Castilian Spain and his populist rants will not be missed even in his own party. His successor (not chosen by him) is Josu Jon Imaz, a moderate with a power base in Vizcaya. In his first big speech, he spoke of creating a civic society for all Basques, not an ethnic one; strongly condemned ETA; and ruled out a repetition of the Lizarra pact that the PNV signed with Batasuna, ETA's political wing, in 1998.

Catalonia's Jordi Pujol also stood down in November, after 23 years as the region's premier. The radical nationalists who chanted "Long Live Free Catalonia" after the election may have sent a chill down Madrileño spines; but the (now departed) Mr Carod-Rovira reassuringly said that independence was not a priority. Pasquall Maragall, the new Socialist premier, is, however, pressing ahead with plans for a

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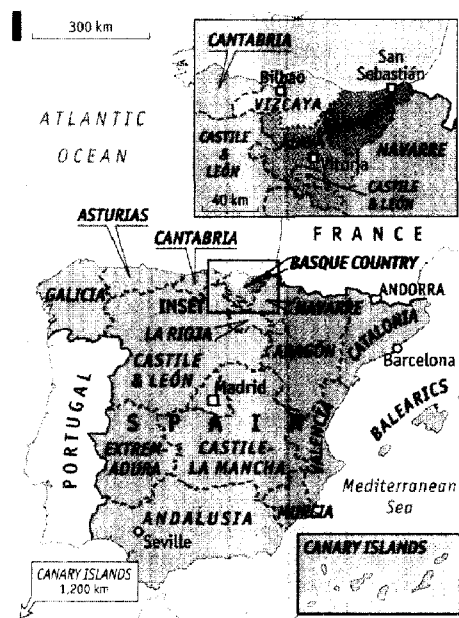
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new statute to include Catalonia's right to be recognised as a nation.

Madrid's response to all this is to assert that the regions already enjoy an extremely high level of autonomy under the 1978 constitution. They handle 60% of Spain's public spending; Madrid's share is just 40%. The Basque region collects all taxes, before passing on a chunk to the centre. The central government brushes off rich Catalonia's complaint that it gives more in taxes than it receives, noting that the Madrid region is also a net contributor.

In the Basque capital, Vitoria, Mr Ibarretxe plays down the controversial elements of his referendum plan. "There has been a phoney debate created by Aznar, who has used it to create a climate of anti-Basque aggression," he says. "It is not an independentista plan. We are not going to make any unilateral moves." The plan, ▶▶



▶ backed by Mr Imaz, is to hold a referendum on the Basques' right to decide their own future, perhaps to make the region a "free state" associated with Spain. But Mr Ibarretxe says all this is negotiable. He wants the plan to be debated in the regional assembly in September. In response to non-nationalists' fears, he insists that "this is a way to open dialogue between all parties and to find a way for non-nationalists and nationalists to live together peacefully."

Many Basques (57%, says one poll) still do not grasp the ultimate aim of the Ibarretxe plan. Basque business is largely sceptical. The government of Álava is hostile, and some politicians there have talked of seceding from the Basque region if Mr Ibarretxe proceeds. Genoveva Gastaminza, editor of the Basque edition of *El País*, believes the plan is going nowhere: "It is a talking-shop. It is a result of the PNV's mistake of the Lizarra pact. They have to be seen to be advancing the nationalist cause but Mr Ibarretxe faces divisions among the party's own conservative, Catholic ranks."

The plan might not win majority support. In a *Euskobarómetro* poll last November, 32% of Basques backed the status quo, 31% supported a federal model of greater autonomy and only 31% favoured independence. Even the now banned Batasuna is lukewarm, irked by the PNV's refusal to form a united front for the March elections and charging that the PNV is using the plan to steal its votes. "We are accused of being *españolistas* from one side and *etarras* on the other," says Mr Ibarretxe, wearily.

Mr Aznar is not taken in by any mollifying words from Vitoria. "To speak of dialogue with constitutional parties and then to defend secession is incompatible," he has said. But Mr Aznar is equally alive to the political benefits of keeping the nationalist bogeyman alive. His party makes great play of jeering the opposition socialists, led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, for their pact with the radical nationalists in Catalonia. Mr Aznar, who survived an ETA assassination attempt in 1995, trumpets the results of his firmness with the regions. His decision to ban Batasuna and his refusal to talk not only to ETA but even to the PNV have, he says, succeeded. He points to the drop in political street violence as well as to the recent apparent defanging of ETA.

There is, even so, force in the Socialist claim that Mr Aznar's tenure has alienated many Catalans and Basques, and also radicalised some strains of nationalism. Moderates in the People's Party hope that while Mr Rajoy continues to slash at the many-headed hydra of ETA he will also bring a change of tone. He might prove more open to debate on how to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of the regions. The screen of European integration could be his best cover for giving them greater autonomy—if he is brave enough to use it. ■