

Ibarretxe and bust?

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A long-simmering row erupts over Basque independence plans

SO FAR this month, the new year talk in Spain has been mostly of constitutional crisis. In Madrid there are dark mutterings about the disintegration of the state. The king and the bishops have pontificated on the sanctity of the constitution. And Spain's defence minister, José Bono, has issued a blunt warning that 'no territory may engage in projects which violate the sovereign will of all Spaniards.'

The fuss began after the Basque parliament voted on December 30th to approve the Ibarretxe plan (named after the regional premier, Juan José Ibarretxe), which seeks to redefine relationships with Madrid and provide for a possible referendum on becoming 'a free state associated with Spain'. The vote for the plan was won only after a last-minute u-turn by three deputies from Batasuna (now called Sozialista Abertzaleak), the banned political wing of the ETA terrorist group. Batasuna had said the plan did not go far enough. By changing his mind, Batasuna's leader, Arnaldo Otegi, who controls seven seats that were won when the party was legal, wrong-footed Mr Ibarretxe's own moderate Basque Nationalist Party.

To the disgust of most of his parliamentary audience, Mr Otegi justified his change of heart by reading out a letter from a fugitive ETA leader (and Batasuna deputy), José Urrutikoetxea Bengoetxea, backing the plan for a referendum. Mr Ibarretxe had pledged that he would not rely on Batasuna support to push his plan through. Spaniards are now angry that it was passed with the help of 'three votes stained with blood'. Yet Mr Ibarretxe points out that both the Socialists and the People's Party (PP) have in the past used Batasuna's votes to block his budgets.

Whatever happens next, many in Madrid as well as the Basque country think the 25-year-old statute on the regions must now change. Mr Ibarretxe has asked a parliamentary commission to negotiate a new statute, as it did in 1979. Mariano Rajoy, the PP leader, called his plan 'the biggest challenge to national unity since 1978'. Even the prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, said it was secessionist, unconstitutional and incompatible with a Europe seeking to give up frontiers. He has ruled out government-to-government negotiations.

At first Mr Zapatero drew criticism for saying that the plan would be stopped at the ballot box, referring to Basque regional elections that are likely to be held in May. A mistake, opined an editorial in *El País*, as it 'tends to favour the nationalists' aim of converting the upcoming elections into a plebiscite on the Ibarretxe plan.' The plan was to be presented to the Spanish parliament, the Cortes, at the end of this week. The PP is asking the constitutional court to overturn a parliamentary ruling allowing a debate at all; if it fails, a debate may be held in March.

Mr Ibarretxe, who also met Mr Zapatero late this week, has in the past played down the more controversial elements of his plan, promising that it does not aim at

independence and that no unilateral steps would be taken. But he has now changed his tune. He wants the plan debated in the Cortes. If it fails there, as is likely, he has added a threat: 'I am not putting in doubt the legitimacy of any institutions, but the will of Basque society will not be supplanted by any other will.'

Mr Zapatero has called for calm, promising that the plan will be defeated in the Cortes, and that only if Mr Ibarretxe presses ahead with an illegal referendum will it go to court. Doom-mongers talk of invoking article 155 of the constitution, dissolving the regional governments. Mr Ibarretxe has also said that there must be an ETA ceasefire before any referendum.

Mr Zapatero's woes are exacerbated by his minority government's dependence on the votes of the nationalist Catalan Republican Left (ERC) party. The ERC is threatening that, if the government says no to the Ibarretxe plan, it will withdraw support, bringing the government down. Yet some critics fear that Mr Zapatero's non-confrontational approach may embolden Catalan nationalists who want a new regional statute too. 'The battle against the plan Ibarretxe is going to be long, at least a year in duration,' says the public administration minister, Jordi Sevilla.

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