

Spain and the Basques

Basque blues

BILBAO AND SAN SEBASTIAN

After the regional election, a chance for a deal with Madrid?

THE Basque premier, Juan José Ibarretxe, had hoped that the regional election on April 17th would give him a new mandate for his plan to move closer to independence. Instead, his Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) lost four seats, leaving it well short of a majority. Spain's Socialist government in Madrid, heartened by a gain of five seats for the local Socialist party, making it the second-biggest in the region, declared that Mr Ibarretxe had failed in his aim. In a low turnout, the PNV, which has been in power for 25 years, lost 140,000 votes from its 2001 tally.

"The Ibarretxe plan has been defeated democratically...[it] is now part of the past," announced José Blanco, a leading local Socialist. The plan was narrowly approved by the Basque parliament in December, but rejected by the Cortes in Madrid in February. Mr Ibarretxe promptly called elections a month early, hoping the masses would rally to the cause. The questions now are: why did his plan not prosper, and is it really dead?

Few voters understood the Ibarretxe plan. Some PNV members said it was too ambitious; others that it did not go far enough. But another reason for the PNV's performance was that it failed to win voters away from Batasuna, the banned political wing of the ETA terrorists. Arnaldo Otegi, Batasuna's leader, seems to have pulled off a master-stroke. After the courts stopped a surrogate party from standing as a Batasuna front, Mr Otegi told supporters to vote for the (almost unknown) local Communist Party. Despite the Communists' close ties to Batasuna, the courts could find no reason to ban them; they won over 12% of the vote and nine seats, two more than the (pre-ban) Batasuna in 2001. The opposition People's Party (PP) criticised the prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, for letting ETA survive politically. "ETA is going to shape political life and that is very discouraging," said Maria San Gil, the PP's local boss.

There will now be months of horse-trading, as the PNV looks for a workable coalition. Mr Ibarretxe may form a minority government in alliance with his current partner, the United Left, plus Aralar, a Batasuna splinter that advocates Basque independence but rejects ETA's terrorism. But that would still give him only 33 seats in the 75-seat assembly, the same as the Socialists and PP combined. Or Mr Ibarretxe could link with the Communists, which

would give him a majority but make it harder to negotiate with Madrid.

A more intriguing possibility is an informal pact with the Socialists. During the campaign Mr Zapatero said that he was prepared to negotiate a new constitutional deal acceptable to a broad majority of Basques, and would put it to a referendum if it won two-thirds backing in the Basque parliament. In this way the Ibarretxe plan could survive in mutated form, perhaps shorn of some demands for national recognition and autonomy. Indeed, many local commentators sense a new optimism.

The sources of this optimism are the "Zapatero effect", the prime minister's almost tiresome willingness to negotiate, plus the fact that Batasuna and ETA have a new desire for peace. ETA has not killed for two years. For the first time in decades the elections were free from violence. Mr Zapatero repeated this week that it was time for solutions. Mr Otegi talks of a deal short of breaking away from Spain that involves "the recognition of the Basque nation and our right to self-determination".

Josu Jon Imaz, the PNV president, insists that there is now an historic chance for an accord. His party wants a broad agreement on a peace process and constitutional reform. Consciously using the language of Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement, he says that "we have to accommodate everybody". But will an Imaz plan be any more successful than the Ibarretxe plan when it meets reality? ■