

Independence days

The Spanish government faces a delicate negotiation if it is to forestall Basque demands for some form of independence

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ANOTHER week, another ETA outrage. On February 9th the Basque terrorists exploded a car bomb in Madrid, injuring over 40 people outside a convention centre about to be visited by the king and the Mexican president. This is the latest in a string of car bombings, though nobody has been killed by ETA for over a year.

The bombs come at a sensitive point in Madrid's relations with the Basques. Mariano Rajoy, leader of the opposition People's Party (PP), has accused the Basques of making a "thinly veiled declaration of independence". He is referring to the plan of the Basque premier, Juan José Ibarretxe, to hold a referendum on the region's right to self-determination and to form a "free state associated with Spain". The Socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero is also under pressure from Catalans who want far more autonomy, especially Josep Lluís Carod-Rovira, leader of the Catalan Nationalist Left that shares power with the Socialists in Catalonia.

Mr Zapatero is accused by critics both of being soft on terrorism and of presiding over the disintegration of Spain. His PP predecessor, José María Aznar, refused to speak to Mr Ibarretxe. Mr Zapatero's conciliatory tone has been seen as weakness. Some claim that regional ambitions pose the greatest threat to Spanish unity since the civil war. Will there soon be an independent Basque state? If Catalonia takes the same path, is this the end of Spain?

The short answer to both questions is no. But there are bumpy months ahead for Mr Zapatero, as Spain's two most fractious regions engage in rough horse-trading over their future relationship with Madrid.

The Spanish government insists the Ibarretxe referendum will not be allowed. "It is simply not going to happen. All the exits are locked," the justice minister, Juan Fernando López Aguilar, told *The Economist* this week. Why not? "It is unconstitutional. It is a matter of principle," he replied. One poll suggests that over 60% of Spaniards want the government to take legal action against the Basque government if it tries to hold the referendum and-incredibly-over half think the armed forces should be wheeled in to stop it.

Mr Zapatero's troubles began in late December when the Basque assembly voted for the Ibarretxe plan, which seeks to introduce Basque citizenship, an

independent judiciary, a penal system, devolved responsibility for social security and the power to sign international treaties. It also stakes claims to Navarre and the French Basque region.

In mid-January Batasuna, ETA's banned political wing, said it was prepared to work for "an agreement between nationalists and non-nationalists". The party leader, Arnaldo Otegi, drew a parallel with Northern Ireland, and called on Mr Zapatero to "go down in history as the Spanish Tony Blair" by negotiating a peace deal. Two days later ETA, which despite its bombings has been weakened by recent arrests, announced its support for Batasuna's overtures. But Mr Zapatero has said that he will talk to ETA only once it lays down its arms indefinitely.

Earlier this month Mr Zapatero allowed the Ibarretxe plan to be debated in the Spanish parliament, the Cortes. "I have come to this parliament to defend the right of the Basque people to decide their own future," said Mr Ibarretxe. After eight hours of debate, the plan was overwhelmingly rejected, by 313 votes to 29. Mr Ibarretxe responded by vowing to call his referendum anyway and moving regional elections forward to April 17th. "The moment has come for Basque society to speak out," he said. "No one who calls himself a democrat can deny our right to decide for ourselves. We can only co-exist with Spain by our own free will."

The polls suggest that Mr Ibarretxe's Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and its allies will win 42% of the vote, falling three seats short of an absolute majority. The PNV has asked Mr Zapatero to allow Batasuna to run in the elections, but refused to delay to give it time to declare the necessary ceasefire. At the May 2001 election seven Batasuna politicians won seats that they kept even after the party was later banned. Theoretically the party will now disappear from any official position.

Mr Zapatero did, however, tell the Cortes that its debate had opened the way for negotiations to take place "for a new project for Euskadi [the Spanish Basque region] and Spain". He added that "the highest degree of self-government is possible, but we will decide together. All the Basques will decide-and all Spaniards." Previously he had ruled out a parliamentary commission to renegotiate the Basques' status. Now it is a possibility.

Hours before the debate the Basque Socialist leader, Patxi López, proposed a diluted form of the Ibarretxe plan that skated around sovereignty. News also emerged of a secret meeting between Mr Zapatero and the PNV president, Josu Jon Imaz. PP tongues have been wagging about a possible deal: Madrid might, for instance, accept more devolved tax-raising powers and a fully autonomous education system.

For all the PP's carping, Mr Zapatero could yet emerge as the architect of a

"new Spain". The constitution has served 27 years; Catalan nationalists are drawing up a new one which, despite Mr Carod-Rovira's populist harangues, will, according to Catalonia's Socialist premier, Pasqual Maragall, remain within the bounds set by the 1978 text. The Basques may yet be persuaded to stay within those bounds too.