



Pablo Sanchez/Reuters

Campaign posters lining a street in Zarautz in Spain's Basque region. The election Sunday will be the Basques' first chance to offer a verdict on Juan José Ibarretxe's vision for greater autonomy from Madrid.

# Basque vote may force showdown over autonomy plan

By Renwick McLean

**MADRID:** Two months ago, Juan José Ibarretxe, the president of the Basque region of northern Spain, stood up in Parliament in Madrid and declared himself the leader of an autonomous nation that was free to break away from Spain and to ignore decisions made by the central government.

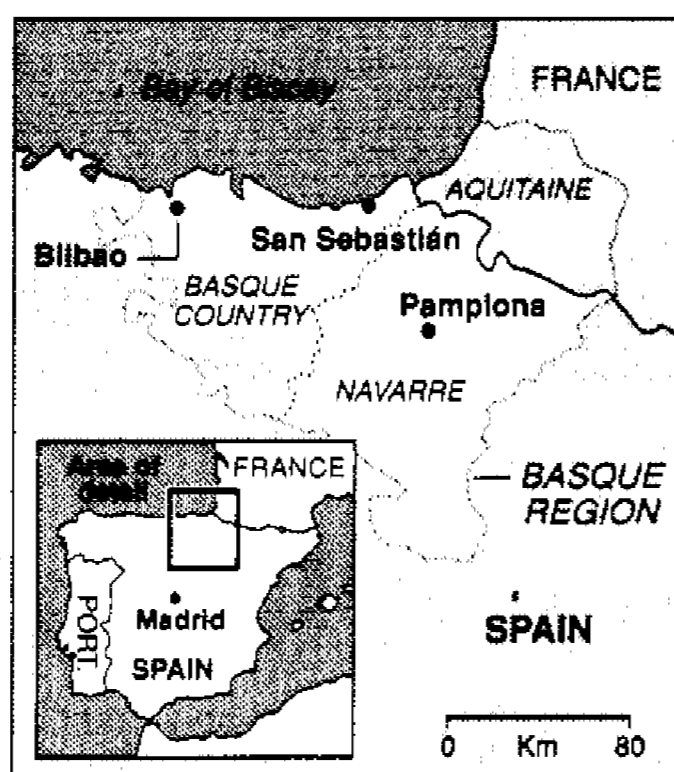
On Sunday, Basques will go to the polls to choose new representatives to their regional parliament in what will be their first chance to offer a verdict on Ibarretxe and his vision for Basque autonomy. Those who oppose Ibarretxe's plan have described it as the most serious threat to the preservation of Spain's borders since democracy was established here on the death of General Francisco Franco 30 years ago.

Ibarretxe's plan for codifying into law the rights he claims for his region was overwhelmingly defeated by the Spanish Parliament on Feb. 1.

But Ibarretxe refused to accept the decision, dissolving the Basque regional assembly the next day and calling for new elections, which he said would endow him and his plan with fresh legitimacy.

Cast in such terms, the elections Sunday have transfixed all but the most apolitical Spaniards and have energized the political classes at all levels of government.

Last Friday, Prime Minister José Luis



NYT

Rodríguez Zapatero rushed back from the funeral of Pope John Paul II in Rome to attend a campaign event in the coastal city of San Sebastian. It was the first of several appearances that Zapatero made in the Basque region in the last week. He has put the elections at the center of his strategy for countering Ibarretxe's vision for Basque sovereignty, which 60 percent of Spaniards consider a threat to national unity, a January opinion poll indicated.

Conservatives have urged the Socialist prime minister to take tougher steps, such as challenging the plan's constitu-

tionality in the courts. But Zapatero says that the best way to respond to the plan is to defeat it democratically by winning seats on Sunday.

Basque voters are expected to return Ibarretxe to power, but Zapatero could claim at least partial victory if Ibarretxe's Basque Nationalist Party loses any seats.

If Ibarretxe and his allies gain seats, however, particularly if they obtain an outright majority in the assembly, the elections will undercut Zapatero's principal criticism of the autonomy plan: that it lacks broad popular support among Basques.

"If they gain seats, it would be worrisome," said an aide to Zapatero, who requested anonymity because he is not authorized to speak publicly about the elections.

María Silvestre, who heads the political science department at Deusto University in Bilbao, cautioned that a majority should not be interpreted as a broad mandate for Ibarretxe to try to move forward with his plan. "He would have political legitimacy, but not social legitimacy," she said. "Ibarretxe's plan does not represent the views of the majority of Basque society."

Although his plan was approved by the regional assembly in late December, opinion polls indicate that most Basques oppose it or prefer alternative methods of expanding Basque autonomy.

Zapatero has said that he is willing to negotiate a new relationship between Madrid and the region that provides greater autonomy for the Basques, but only if the new model is supported by a broad majority of the region's people.

Despite the focus by politicians on Ibarretxe's plan, political analysts said that Sunday's elections will not necessarily provide a clear indication of where Basques stand on the issue because other considerations are likely to influence the voting.

"Ibarretxe and his administration get very high marks for their management of the government," said Julián Santamaría, the director of the political science department at the Complutense University in Madrid. Many Basques may vote for him because of that rather than because of his position on regional autonomy, he said.

Ibarretxe, nonetheless, appears determined to portray the elections as a referendum on his plan for Basque sovereignty.

At a campaign rally near Bilbao last Saturday, he urged voters to go to the polls to create "a human tide, a clamor, demanding that a process of negotiation be opened" by the central government so that the autonomy plan can be enacted.

He has said that he will call Zapatero the day after the elections to request a

forum for discussing his plan.

The semiautonomous Basque region, which includes three provinces in northeastern Spain, is home to about two million people, or about 5 percent of the Spanish population.

It is perhaps the oldest living culture in Europe, scholars say, and despite its long history as part of Spain, has never surrendered its distinctive identity.

Throughout Spain's 30 years of democratic government, calls for independence have been a constant presence in some sectors of Basque society, taking their most visible form in the terrorist attacks by the militant separatist group ETA. Most Basque separatists, however, condemn ETA, which has killed more than 800 people since 1968 in its campaign for an independent state.

The debate over the region's place in Spain is likely to intensify in the coming months and years, scholars said.

The path advocated by Ibarretxe may not be the one supported by most Basques, but his appearance before the national Parliament in February forced the issue onto the table once again, perhaps irrevocably, scholars said.

"A serious debate is pending in this country on the future of the Basque country," said Silvestre, the political scientist at Deusto University.

International Herald Tribune