

Madrid for independence

By Elizabeth Nash in Madrid

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The Basque parliament approved a plan for negotiated independence from Spain last night, thanks to three surprise votes from MPs belonging to a banned separatist party sympathetic to Eta.

The plan, masterminded by Juan José Ibarretxe, the leader of the region's Basque Nationalist government, sets the region on a collision course with Madrid, which has consistently rejected the plan as an unconstitutional blueprint for secession. The plan "has no possibility of being approved or implemented", the government said in a statement. In a rare gesture of solidarity, the conservative opposition Popular Party stood behind the ruling Socialists.

The conflict is likely to produce the most serious crisis for Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's Socialists in the coming months. Mr Ibarretxe plans to put the proposal, which seeks to rewrite the region's 1978 statute of autonomy known as the Statute of Gernika, to the Basque people in a referendum, regardless of whether Madrid approves it or not.

The plan, which envisages the Basque Country as an independent state in "free association" with Spain, is likely to form the platform for the ruling Basque Nationalist Party (BNP) in regional elections due in the spring. Should the BNP win, as is widely expected, the region's hand would be much strengthened. Madrid is constitutionally entitled to veto a regional referendum, but the government would have to weigh the consequences of dashing a proposal backed by most Basques in an election.

Basques already control revenues, police, schools, health care and other public services. The Basque language, once suppressed, is now co-official with Spanish in the region.

Mr Ibarretxe's plan would establish a Basque judicial system and representation in international bodies including the EU. His aim is to seek a political solution to the conflict that has torn the country for decades.

The six MPs from the Socialista Abertzaleak (formerly the banned Batasuna party, regarded as the political wing of Eta armed separatists) had earlier opposed the plan, saying it did not go far enough. But at the last minute three of the six MPs, who still retain the seats they won before the ban, unexpectedly voted for it, producing the crucial absolute majority.

"You have [the] votes to start a political dialogue that includes everyone, so we

can have a referendum where everyone agrees on the question, the mechanisms and how it will be carried out," said Arnaldo Otegi, leader of the radical separatist MPs.

Mr Otegi said that three of his MPs voted "yes to a Basque Homeland, yes to a popular consultation [the proposed regional referendum], yes to self-determination, yes to an agreement that closes the doors on errors of the past." Mr Otegi said he wanted to "open the door to political dialogue that could bring to this [Basque] country a just and lasting peace."

Politicians in Madrid from left and right warned that the regional government had caved in to armed radicals who wanted to break up Spain. The plan will now pass to the Congress of Deputies in Madrid where it will be rejected. Even to have his proposal debated in Madrid is a symbolic victory for Mr Ibarretxe. That debate is likely to stir deep passions over how Spaniards define themselves as a nation, and is bound to re-open bitter regional quarrels.

Mr Zapatero, despite his opposition, has relaunched dialogue with the Basque leader frozen by the former conservative prime minister Jose Maria Aznar. He said last night he would shortly announce a date to discuss the next step with Mr Ibarretxe.

Mr Zapatero faces problems within his own minority government, since he depends on votes from the ruling left-wing Catalan coalition, which includes the pro-independence Republican Left Party (ERC). The ERC enthusiastically backed the Basque plan from the outset, and provided practical advice and moral support for Basque efforts to achieve independence without violence.

Mr Otegi, meanwhile, is desperate to get the ban on Batasuna lifted so his party can participate in the region's forthcoming elections, and has been stressing his commitment to solely political activities. Batasuna has become so discredited while clandestine that unbanning is seen as its last chance to escape political oblivion.