

Spanish Prime Minister's Stance on Basques Is Called Hypocritical

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By RENWICK McLEAN

MADRID, Jan. 11 - While Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero tries to stand firm against the Basque region's recent declaration that it has the right to break away from Spain, conservative critics are seizing on his congressional pact with a separatist party from another semiautonomous region, Catalonia, to cast him as a hypocritical and compromised leader.

Mr. Zapatero formed a loose pact with the party, the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, to gain a majority in Parliament after he led the Socialist Party to power in March with less than half the popular vote.

On Tuesday, Mariano Rajoy, the president of Spain's main opposition group, the Popular Party, accused Mr. Zapatero of playing down the seriousness of the threat posed by the Basques because of pressure from the Catalan party, which shares the Basque goal of greater autonomy. "You are a prisoner of the Esquerra Republicana and you don't want your partner to get irritated," he said.

Aides to Mr. Zapatero reject the claim that he has been soft on the Basques, saying he has stated firmly that the declaration of autonomy is unconstitutional and will have no effect on relations between Madrid and Vitoria, home of the Basque regional government.

They also contend that the leaders of the Catalan party have always known that Mr. Zapatero would oppose any declaration of secession rights and that he has made it clear to them that his position is not negotiable.

Criticism of Mr. Zapatero's relationship with the Catalan party began to grow after the party expressed support for the Basque declaration, which was passed by the Basque parliament in late December as part of a complex plan for overhauling the region's legal ties with Madrid. Shortly after, Joan Puigcercós, the Catalan party's secretary general, called the plan "an appetizer" for Catalan requests for greater autonomy that are expected in the coming months.

"I am convinced that what we have seen these days on the front pages would look small" in comparison to what is coming, he said. "Catalonia is surely the biggest problem that the Spanish state has today."

The statements by Mr. Puigcercós gave Mr. Zapatero's critics serious ammunition to use against his handling of the Basque plan.

Most of Spain's 17 regions are requesting changes to the legal ties binding them to the central government in Madrid. While most of the alterations are moderate in nature, conservative politicians here say that any hint of concessions to Basque leaders will encourage other regions to make greater demands for autonomy.

In the last week, the Catalan separatists have made several threats to withdraw their support for the Socialist Party if Mr. Zapatero follows through on his pledge not to negotiate with the Basques.

Legal scholars say losing Catalan support would not jeopardize the future of the Socialist government, since there is no formal coalition between the two parties. Mr. Zapatero "could continue governing with a plurality without major problems," said Mariano Torcal, a political science professor at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona.

But the prospects for enacting his legislative agenda would most likely dim. "The reform bills that require an absolute majority would probably be paralyzed," Mr. Torcal said.

On Thursday, Mr. Zapatero is expected to meet with the president of the Basque regional government, Juan José Ibarretxe, to discuss the plan approved by the Basque parliament in December.