

## Spanish Basques Approve Secession Measure

New York Times. December 31, 2004.

By RENWICK McLEAN

MADRID, Dec. 30 - The Basque Parliament approved a measure on Thursday that says the Basque region has the right to secede from Spain, a move analysts described as the most serious threat to national unity since the establishment of democracy here nearly 30 years ago.

The measure, approved by a vote of 39 to 35, is part of a complex plan that calls for an overhaul of the region's relationship with the central government in Madrid.

"We express our will to form a new political pact," the plan says, "that grows from a new model for relations with the Spanish state based on freedom of association."

Before the vote, which was held in the Basque capital, Vitoria, Juan Jos? Ibarretxe, the president of the Basque region and the main author of the plan, said, "We are not proposing a project for breaking away from Spain, but we are formalizing a project for friendly coexistence between the Basque region and Spain.

"The Basque country is not a subordinate part of the Spanish state," he added. "The only way there will be a shared relationship with the state is if we decide there will be one."

Political analysts said that the vote gave momentum to the separatist movement in the Basque region, and presented the central government with the task of confronting the movement without inflaming it.

"This is the clearest push for independence that the Basque country has made," said Antonio Ca?o, a senior editor at the newspaper El Pa?s. "It is a very clear challenge to the unity of Spain. I'd say it places the country in its biggest crisis of unity since democracy began here."

For nearly 40 years, the various regions that make up Spain were kept together by the iron fist of Gen. Francisco Franco. But since his death in 1975, some analysts have wondered if a democratic government would be able to keep the country united. The central government, led by the Socialist Party, has said that it is willing to discuss requests for greater autonomy, but has rejected the claim that the Basque

region has the right to unilaterally determine its relationship with Madrid.

"We've made it very clear," María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, the deputy prime minister, said at a conference before the vote. "The plan goes against the Constitution."

The plan now moves to the national Parliament, where it will surely be rejected, analysts said. But supporters of the plan, led by Mr. Ibarretxe, said a defeat would not stop them from submitting it to a popular referendum in the Basque region next year. The central government has said such a referendum is illegal.

Thursday's vote surprised analysts here, who expected the measure to fail to gain the support of a small group of separatists who had said the plan was too moderate. But

three members of the group, a party known as Herri Batasuna, decided to support it, providing enough votes for the majority needed for passage.

The Basque region, a mountainous area of two million people on the northern border with France, is one of 17 semi-autonomous regions that make up Spain. Many of them, most notably Catalonia, are also seeking greater autonomy from Madrid.

But it is the Basques who are most clearly associated with a drive for looser ties with the central government, and even separatism. The militant group ETA has made headlines for decades through a bloody campaign to establish an independent Basque state, killing more than 800 people since 1968 in the process.

The overwhelming majority of Basques oppose ETA, whose tactics may even weaken support for independence, analysts said. But slightly more than half of Basque voters support so-called nationalist parties, which advocate greater autonomy.