

## Basque Leader Defies Spain Parliament Over Autonomy

Reuters. February 1, 2005.

MADRID (Reuters) - The Spanish parliament rejected a plan to give the troubled Basque country virtual independence on Tuesday but the region's leader vowed to press ahead with a referendum on his proposal.

Lawmakers defeated by 313 to 29, with two abstentions, the plan by Basque premier Juan Jose Ibarretxe, which has snared the minority Socialist government between regional aspirations for greater autonomy and a hardline opposition intent on defending Madrid's authority.

"If this parliament decides to slam the door on the absolute majority of the Basque parliament and on Basque society, I will simply keep my word and go ahead with a consultation of the (Basque) people," Ibarretxe told lawmakers before the vote.

The previous center-right government had threatened to throw Ibarretxe in jail if he tried to hold a vote, but Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero has tried a more conciliatory approach.

An attempt by Ibarretxe to hold a referendum would complicate matters for Zapatero, forcing him to act firmly or risk fresh accusations from the right that he is soft on separatists.

"If we live together, we must decide together," Zapatero told Ibarretxe during a tense, almost eight-hour-long parliamentary debate, broadcast in full on state television.

He spoke of "a new project for the Basque country and the whole of Spain," but stopped short of making precise proposals.

Socialist parliamentary group spokesman Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba later said the party was open to a reform of the northern region's existing statute of autonomy, which includes the right to run its own police force and education policies.

### REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Several Spanish regions, including wealthy Catalonia in the northeast, have similar autonomy statutes and the Ibarretxe plan has raised the specter of other challenges to Madrid's authority from regions with a strong identity.

The Socialists and the right-of-center Popular Party joined forces to defeat the

plan, but in a sign of possible future trouble for the ruling party, one Catalan party usually allied to the Socialists voted in favor of the plan.

The project has caused uproar in Spain since it was approved by the Basque regional parliament on Dec. 30 with votes from Batasuna, a party branded the political branch of armed separatists ETA.

PP leader Mariano Rajoy made much of Batasuna's support for the plan, equating Ibarretxe's brand of moderate nationalism with ETA violence, and saying the Basque premier's plan was tantamount to a declaration of independence ``inspired by ETA."

Madrid's fraught relations with the Basque region have been one of Spain's biggest problems since its transition to democracy in the late 1970s.

Passions run high over the issue, partly because it is often overshadowed by ETA, which has killed some 850 people in a bombing and shooting campaign for an independent Basque homeland carved out of northern Spain and southwestern France. The European Union and United States brand ETA a terrorist group.