

## Mooted ETA talks divide Spaniards

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Advertising The Basque militant group ETA may be weakening, but any discussion over its possible demise is dividing Spain to a degree that its attacks rarely have.

Two weeks ago, Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero won parliamentary backing for a proposal to negotiate with the group if it would renounce violence.

The government said the future of ETA was bleak enough that it might be persuaded to disband if offered a chance to negotiate small concessions from Madrid, like the return of imprisoned ETA members to Basque jails.

But the proposal has drawn sharp criticism from the families of victims of ETA bombings, as well as from academics and editorial writers, and has driven a wedge between the major parties on an issue once considered exempt from partisan politics.

Members of the main opposition group in parliament, the Popular Party, have attacked Zapatero's proposal as tantamount to appeasing terrorists.

The only way to defeat ETA, the opposition party says, is to crush it using all the powers available to Spain's law-enforcement agencies.

But members of Zapatero's Socialist Party say that an offer of dialogue contingent on the renunciation of violence may bring about a quicker and more peaceful solution.

They also contend that Spanish law-enforcement agencies could be reaching the limits of their success against ETA, and that persuasion may be the only way to strike the final blow.

The government says the proposal is its own initiative, but there has been speculation on editorial pages here that it is instead a response to an overture from ETA, an assertion government officials deny.

A long-term effort by the police to infiltrate ETA has been successful, officials said, weakening the group psychologically and organizationally.

But some academics contend that Zapatero has fallen into a trap set by ETA, which they say has been giving false signals that it is willing to disband in order to set off political divisions over how to manage the peace.