

Basque Vote Draws Interest

Regional Head, if Re-Elected, Vows to Pursue 'Co-Sovereignty'

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Bilbao, Spain

ON SUNDAY, voters in the Basque Country of Spain will go to the polls to elect a new regional government. But interest in the vote's outcome won't be confined to Madrid: Minority movements in places as far away as Iraq and Indonesia also will be tuning in.

The Basque Country is a relatively small region, but it has become influential among stateless nations around the world. The reason: Its leader is pushing an audacious plan for virtual independence from Spain that would give the already autonomous region its own foreign ministry, judicial system and sports teams to compete in international competitions.

The plan is the brainchild of Juan José Ibarretxe, a soft-spoken teetotaler, avid bike rider and ardent nationalist who has headed the Basque regional government for the past six years. If he wins re-election as expected this weekend, he has pledged to defy Madrid's rejection of his plan and hold a referendum on it among the Basque Country's 2.1 million people.



Juan José Ibarretxe

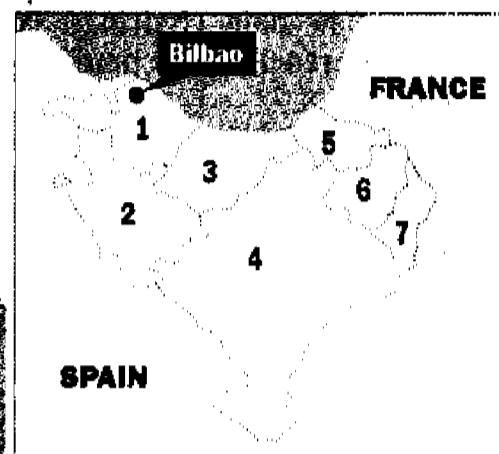
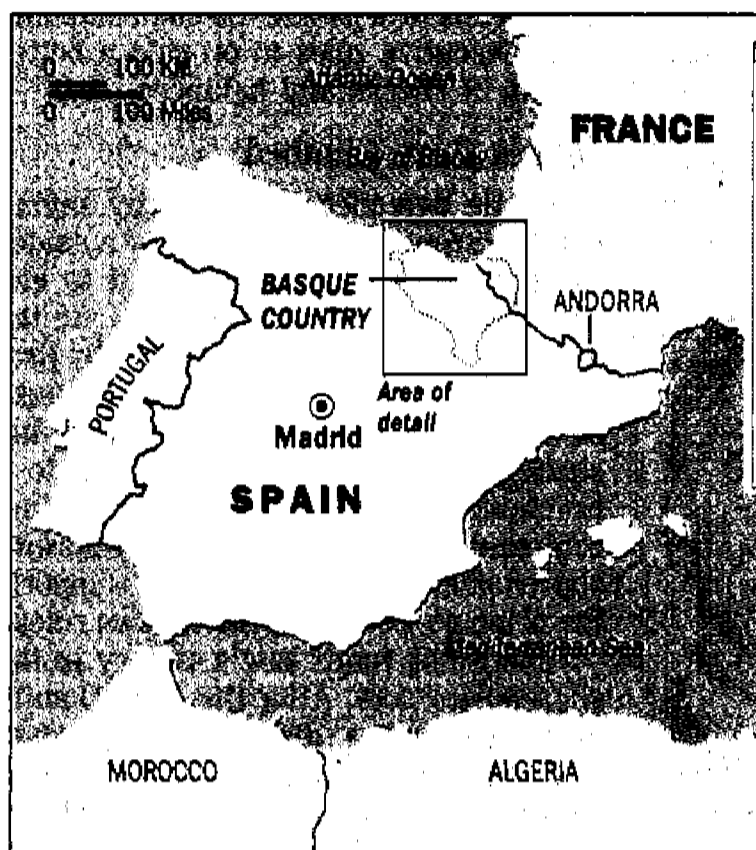
Mr. Ibarretxe's proposal to unilaterally declare "co-sovereignty" with Spain has ignited a political firestorm. One opposition party official calls it the "ideological triumph of ETA," the terrorist group that has waged a 37-year campaign for an

independent Basque land. The Ibarretxe plan, which Spain's parliament has already rejected, shares some goals with ETA, but it aims to achieve those ends through peaceful means and savvy politicking, not terrorism.

For that reason, Mr. Ibarretxe's plan has attracted attention in the rest of the world. Its roots in territoriality and cultural and linguistic differences give it appeal across borders, political analysts say. Minority groups in northern Iraq, Turkey, Ecuador, Bolivia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and even Chechnya have studied it as a blueprint for their own disputes.

As globalization and the creation of super-states like the European Union spur renewed interest in minority iden-

Quest for Independence



The Spanish provinces are part of what Basque nationalists call Euskal Herria

Spanish regions **French regions**

- | | |
|-------------|---------------|
| 1. Bizkaia | 5. Lapurdi |
| 2. Araba | 6. Benafarroa |
| 3. Gipuzkoa | 7. Zuberoa |
| 4. Nafarroa | |

titles, the plan's success "could change the political landscape of the 21st century," says James Minahan, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Stateless Nations*.

Mr. Ibarretxe's approach has struck a chord in Iraq's Kurdish north, for example. In late 2002, five months before the U.S. invasion, an official Basque delegation traveled to Iraq to present Kurdish strongman Masoud Barzani with a glass-encased oak branch. It came from the old Guernica tree, which survived the Spanish Civil War-era bombing of the town of Guernica and is an enduring symbol of Basque nationalism.

Kurdish politicians say Mr. Ibarretxe's plan has influenced their thinking as they prepare to submit proposals for the new Iraqi constitution. Later this year, a delegation of Kurdish jurists will study the Basque model firsthand in Spain.

U.S. officials in Washington acknowledge that the Kurds have studied the Basque model, but note they also have looked at many others.

The international interest has emboldened Mr. Ibarretxe, who says his role model is Ghandi. "It's clear there is a global movement of stateless nations, and we demand our say in this new world," he said in a recent interview.

Within Spain, Mr. Ibarretxe is widely disliked, with many Spaniards worrying about his party's policies of ideological and linguistic re-education and lingering ethnic politics. Even in the Basque

Country, Mr. Ibarretxe is controversial. Basque society is bitterly polarized, with only about half the population describing itself as nationalist.

"This is not a homogenous situation like Kurdistan or Quebec," says Joseba Arregi, a former member of Mr. Ibarretxe's party. "In many respects, this is a fictional country, and the facade is starting to come off." Mr. Arregi gave up his party membership last year after disagreeing with Mr. Ibarretxe's sovereignty aims.

For now, Mr. Ibarretxe's plan is more a bargaining chip than a realistic template. He is evasive about when he will hold the referendum if he is re-elected, and the plan—if ever approved in a popular vote—would be difficult to apply without Spain's cooperation. Most constitutional scholars think it's illegal and not viable. But Mr. Ibarretxe has successfully used it already to squeeze concessions out of the Spanish government, which promised this week to overhaul the 1979 pact laying the ground rules for Basque autonomy in the next two years.

Mr. Ibarretxe has made the Basque Country more visible on the international stage. The region has its own foreign-relations office, and Mr. Ibarretxe often meets with leaders in Latin America and Europe. If other movements are studying the Basque model, "I suppose it is because they find our actions rational," he says.

—Yochi Dreazen in Washington
contributed to this article.