

Political crisis deepens in Spain following ETA cease-fire

Vicky Short
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Spain is gripped by a serious constitutional crisis that could herald its disintegration as a nation. The declaration of an indefinite cease-fire by the Basque separatist ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna--Basque Homeland and Freedom) movement two weeks ago has provoked sharp discord between the government and the main opposition party. It has also exacerbated conflicts between the government and the leaders of various separatist and nationalist parties.

Popular Party (PP) Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar has held a series of meetings with leaders of the other main government and opposition parties in a continuing effort to devise a co-ordinated political response to ETA's cease-fire. ETA declared as long ago as March 1996 that if the Spanish state recognised the right to self-determination and the territorial integrity of the Basque country, ETA would declare a cease-fire. It asserted that a democratic process in which the Basque population would decide all aspects related to their future would follow.

Determined to wipe out ETA, the Aznar government continued its campaign of state repression, which dismantled many of ETA's cells, disrupted its financial network, imprisoned leading members of its political wing, Herri Batasuna (HB), and closed down HB's daily newspaper. Against this strategy, the opposition Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) and others sought to pressure the government into organising a political counteroffensive led by the 'moderate democratic parties'.

Izquierda Unida (IU--United Left), an amalgam of radicals and nationalists led by Spain's Stalinists, came forward as champions of this alternative. Under its auspices, the Basque separatists formed a bloc with other Basque parties and trade unions to call for greater independence from central government. They won the

support of the Catalan and Galician separatist parties, CiU (Convergencia i Unio) and BNG (Bloque Nacionalista Gallego) around the general demand for greater regional autonomy.

ETA and HB called their cease-fire in an attempt to lay the basis for the type of 'peace process' that produced the Northern Ireland Agreement. Last Monday the 'Declaraci'n de Lizarra', signed by the various separatist parties, was given to Gerry Adams, leader of the Irish republican party Sinn Fein, when he visited Bilbao as a guest of HB. He was asked to deliver the document to US President Bill Clinton when he meets him in Washington on October 10.

The Basque separatists' shift in tactics has left the policy of the PP government in disarray. On September 26 Aznar attempted to curb the demands of the Basque nationalists and their attacks on Spain's *Carta Magna* (constitution), with a conciliatory speech in San Sebastian. He stated, 'There is room to achieve peace within the present *Carta Magna*.'

This was met with a sharp retort from Xabier Arzalluz, president of the main Basque nationalist party, the PNV (Partido Nacionalista Vasco). 'I don't know if there is room for peace in the constitution, but there is no room for this [Basque] people in this constitution ... not in this one, nor in any other constitution which does not respect the will of the Basques.... Right now, as Basque nationalists, we don't accept any constitution ... in which the Basque people are not able to choose to stay or not to stay, or how to stay within this constitution.'

Arzalluz was speaking to over 100,000 members and supporters of the PNV in Vitoria. He reminded the government that he was sharing the platform with representatives of other nationalist parties. The Catalan CiU and the Galician BNG were not in agreement with

the *Carta Magna* either, he said. Firstly, because Article 8 says that the 'army is the guarantor of territorial unity, and these are not peace words,' and secondly because it does not allow the possibility for the nationalities to decide their own future. 'The gun is the ultimate reasoning of the constitution and that does not say much in favour of peace.'

Arzalluz had no less harsh words for Felipe Gonzalez, ex-prime minister and leader of the PSOE, whom he accused of thinking 'like a Serb'. This was in response to Gonzalez's fears that, following Spain's transition from fascist dictatorship under Franco to parliamentary democracy, 'the 'second transition' may go on the road not to Brussels, but Tirana and Sarajevo.'

The PSOE called on the government to demand Arzalluz declare his loyalty to the constitution. Gonzalez made clear his agreement with Aznar, stating that only the constitution guarantees a 'dignified' peace. 'We don't accept that the price of peace is a political concession to the nationalists.'

In an attempt to diffuse the situation, Arzalluz held meetings with the prime minister in which he said that an agreement would not be possible without sufficient consensus, involving the government and the PSOE. The peace process could go ahead immediately, he added, if demands for greater autonomy were addressed at a later date.

IU's general co-ordinator in the Basque country, Javier Madrazo, agreed with Arzalluz, saying, 'The majority of the Basque people do not identify themselves with this constitution.'

For its part, the Catalan CiU fears its own demands may be submerged by Basque events. In his speech opening the Catalan parliament, CiU leader Jordi Pujol said that whatever happens in the Basque country, the Catalan government wants more power and sovereignty. And they want it within two to three years.

The objective is to convert the *Generalitat* (autonomous government) into Catalonia's only authority, except for those fields exclusively reserved for central government under the constitution. The first partial aim is to achieve a new autonomous financial system, similar to that already existing in the Basque region, in which the *Generalitat* collects all taxes and then transfers an agreed sum to central government. This, said Pujol, could be achieved through a more flexible interpretation of the constitution. If not, he

warned, 'The constitution is revisable ... it is not untouchable.'

Referring to the 'solidarity and loyalty' shown to the rest of the Spanish State (a reference to CiU support for both the previous PSOE and the current PP minority governments) he said that the *Generalitat* had earned the right to put forward its demands without reservation.

Though precipitated by ETA's cease-fire, a constitutional crisis was waiting to emerge. The 1978 constitution was the culmination of the so-called peaceful transition from 36 years of fascism to parliamentary democracy following Franco's death in 1975.

All of the political leaders mentioned above took part in devising the very constitution that they are now prepared to tear apart. Under the direction of Santiago Carrillo, then general secretary of the Communist Party, the major parties, the separatist parties and the trade unions united in order to suppress the anger of Spanish workers after Franco's death. They imposed a constitution that provided both an amnesty for the fascists and preserved bourgeois rule.

The 1978 constitution sought to accommodate the disparate regional interests that were suppressed by the Franco regime within a 'Nation of Autonomous Regions,' made up of 17 distinct areas. Since then the Basques and Catalans have achieved a large measure of autonomy in return for acting as parliamentary partners to both the last PSOE government and the present PP government.

Today, however, preserving the territorial integrity of Spain and its national market is far less important to the bourgeoisie in the various regions than developing direct connections with the world market and securing international investment in their areas. The Basque country, for instance, is one of the most industrialised parts of Spain. The separatists' aim is to be able to administer the Basque economy and in this way establish independent relations both with the European Union and the transnational corporations.



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