

Basque nationalists win regional elections

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The political wing of the Basque terrorist organisation ETA saw their vote halved in last Sunday's elections held in the region. Against all media predictions, the mainstream Basque parties obtained their biggest ever vote. However, the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV, Basque Nationalist Party) in coalition with *Eusko Alkartasuna* (EA, Basque Solidarity) failed to secure an overall majority, taking 33 of the 75 seats in the Basque regional parliament.

There was a record turn out of 80 percent in the three Basque provinces of Álava, Vizcaya and Guipúzcoa, compared with 69.5 percent in 1998. Immediately after the results were announced, PNV President Xabier Arzalluz said that what was needed was a dialogue to create a round table of all the parties "like in Ireland".

Popular Party (PP) leader and Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar had called for the elections to be a "referendum" on ETA violence. While the Spanish government stepped up its repression and vilification of the separatists, none of the vital issues confronting the Basque people, such as unemployment, declining living standards, the crisis in agriculture and industry, education, health, pensions, etc., were discussed in the course of the campaign.

In the run up to the poll, there were diverse alliances and political agreements between the so called "democratic forces." The Socialist Party (PSOE) even promised that it would join the PP in a coalition government, justified on the basis of "keeping out the terrorists".

This campaign, together with widespread disgust at the continued terrorist actions by ETA during the elections, including killings, bombings and intimidation, meant *Euskal Herritarrok* (EH, Basque Citizens), ETA's political arm, saw its share of the vote halved from 14 to 7 seats.

Spain's ruling PP and its smaller regional ally *Unidad Alavesa* (Alavan Unity) won 19 seats, an increase of

just one vote on their 1998 result. The PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) took 13 (down one), and the former Stalinists of *Izquierda Unida* (IU, United Left) won 3 seats, an increase of one.

Since it ended its 14-month ceasefire in December 1999, ETA has killed 30 people and injured scores of others. Those killed include politicians from the PP and the PSOE, journalists, military officers, judges, as well as the people working for them such as drivers, bodyguards, cooks and others. Many innocent people have also been wounded in the terrorist attacks, including children.

The rightwing PP government refused to negotiate with ETA during its ceasefire, or agree to one of its demands that ETA prisoners be moved to jails nearer the Basque Country. As soon as ETA then recommenced its bombing campaign, the government stepped up its repression. Criminal investigations were launched, the organisation's newspaper was closed down and dozens of ETA guerrillas arrested. Judge Baltasar Garzon, at the centre of moves to extradite Pinochet from London last year, outlawed ETA's youth organisation *Haika*.

The Basque region already enjoys a high degree of autonomy under Spain's 1978 constitution, having its own police force and powers of taxation. The Basque regional government has run the education system for the last 20 years. In Madrid, the Spanish government and politicians accuse the Basque administration of misusing its autonomous powers. They argue that the region's education system teaches a negative view of Spain and encourages demands for a separate Basque homeland, while the Basque police turn a blind eye to acts of terrorism.

There is no doubt that this demonisation of the PNV as supporters of terrorism by the "democratic forces" of the PP and PSOE has backfired on the government and played into the hands of the constitutional nationalists.

While many Basque voters are repulsed by ETA's reckless and indiscriminate violence, they also rejected the prospect of a PP-led Basque regional government supported by the PSOE.



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