Spain: ETA bombing campaign aids government offensive against democratic rights

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The ruling conservative Popular Party (PP) in Spain is looking to exploit another summer bombing campaign by the Basque separatist terrorist group ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) as an opportunity to clamp down on domestic opposition, particularly in the Basque region.

Under the guise of the "war against terror," the PP government is openly preparing further assaults on democratic rights, starting with all shades of Basque nationalism. The government, which alienated large sections of the Spanish people with its support for the US-led war against Iraq, has gone so far as to state that it will make opposition to Basque independence the main plank of its next national election campaign.

Recent explosions in the holiday resorts of Alicante and Benidorm and at Santander airport bear all the hallmarks of ETA's previous summer bombing campaigns. There were no injuries at Santander, but the simultaneous explosions in Alicante and Benidorm injured 12 people, among them six tourists.

The Alicante bomb was left in a hotel next door to the local PP headquarters. The hotel was evacuated, and nobody was injured in the PP offices. Several students at a neighbouring language school suffered injuries. A Dutch student is reported to be in a coma.

The bomb in Benidorm went off 20 minutes before the time given in a telephone warning, injuring four police bomb-disposal experts. A fortnight earlier police had defused a 4kg device found in a hotel in Pamplona during the bull-running festival.

Such a bombing campaign is utterly reactionary. ETA's stated aim is the establishment of an independent Basque state, formed of the Basque regions of northern Spain as well as parts of southern France. Its objective has nothing to do with advancing the social and democratic conditions of working people—the victims of its bombs are Spanish and migrant workers, or those holidaying from across the world—but to clear the way for the regional bourgeoisie to open its own direct relations with the European Union and other sources of international investment.

To this end ETA has targeted Spanish holiday resorts in an attempt to undermine the tourist industry (which accounts for some 12 per cent of Spain's GDP) and thus force the government into negotiations over its demands. In January the organisation wrote to the embassies of the United States and Australia and members of the European Union in Madrid, advising them of the dangers of holidaying in the country this summer.

ETA's indiscriminate terror activities have inevitably generated hostility amongst Spanish and Basque workers. Whilst Basque nationalist parties are an important part of the local regional government, the parties historically associated with ETA have only ever achieved 20 percent of the vote in the region. That was during a ceasefire by the organisation.

Without any popular base of support, ETA pinned everything on manoeuvres with the government. In 1998-99 ETA conducted a 14-month ceasefire modelled on that of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) that eventually led to the Good Friday Agreement between the British and Irish governments. ETA hoped that its own ceasefire would enable it to open up talks with Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar. But Aznar was only prepared to negotiate ETA's disarmament and the transfer of ETA prisoners to Basque jails.

Faced with this impasse, ETA ended its ceasefire and began a series of bombings and assassinations, including leading members of the PP and the Socialist Party (PSOE). But the Aznar government has been able to utilise the Bush administration's so-called "war on terrorism" to intensify its clampdown against the group, using ever more draconian methods.

Just months after the terror attacks in New York, Aznar secured a significant victory with a declaration from the EU labelling ETA a terrorist organisation. It has pressed home this advantage since. In July 2002 Judge Baltasar Garzon ordered the seizure of all assets belonging to ETA's political wing, Herri Batasuna. One month later Garzon implemented a ban on the organisation's electoral activities.

In February this year the left-leaning Basque-language paper *Egunkaria* was closed down for refusing to join the denunciations of ETA. Its editor Marcelo Otamendi was arrested and, he alleges, tortured in custody by police. National Court Judge Juan del Olmo has now ordered a six-month extension to the "preventive measures" which froze the paper's assets and closed its offices. Judicial proceedings have not yet reached a decision on the substance of the charges against *Egunkaria*, namely that it belongs to or cooperates with ETA. Two members of the paper's board, Inaki Uria and Xavier Oleaga, are still in prison.

In a separate decision the High Court ruled that a five-year ban against the Basque nationalist paper *Egin*, which expired recently, should remain in place until a debt to Social Security has been met. The High Court did agree that the editorial board of the paper, which was pro-ETA, should now be allowed access again to their editorial offices, which have remained locked during the ban.

In March Spain's Supreme Court banned Batasuna permanently—the first time since Franco's death that a political party has been banned in Spain. Finally, in May, no doubt to reward the Spanish government's support for its war against Iraq, the Bush administration added Batasuna to its list of terrorist groups.

The suppression of Batasuna was accompanied by threats to the conservative Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), which is in the leadership of the regional government. Aznar described the PNV as "soft on terror" for its suggestion that the banning of Batasuna might drive people away from the parliamentary process.

This situation has now intensified, following proposals by *lehendakari* (Basque regional Premier) Juan Jose Ibarretxe for a new relationship between the Basque region and Madrid. Ibarretxe's plan is that the

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Basque region would have associate sovereign status with Spain, rather than its current regional autonomy. This could only be achieved by tearing up Spain's current constitution, which was written as a compromise deal in 1978 after the end of the Franco regime.

Aznar's PP, along with the PSOE, have explicitly stated that they will not tolerate any proposals for Basque independence. The PP has denounced the proposal as being an evasion of the war against terror. Spanish Interior Minister Angel Acebes said Ibarretxe was proposing "institutional rupture, which is prejudicial to the fight against terrorism, instead of collaborating in the break-up of terrorist groups." Spanish Justice Minister Jose Maria Michavila said Ibarretxe was "fleeing" his responsibility to fight terrorism.

Aznar is due to stand down as head of the PP in September. Senior members of the PP have made it clear that whoever replaces him will have leeway on some policy matters, but not on the question of opposition to Ibarretxe's plan. "[Opposition to the sovereignty proposal] is not a subject that can be understood as being within the personal remit of the new candidate," said one regional party leader.

There is a strong suggestion that the PP's national campaign in March 2004 will focus almost entirely on the suppression of the Basque question, by a further invocation of the "war against terror." One of Aznar's possible successors, Deputy Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, negotiated the 1992 agreement on the development of the state of the autonomous regions. Some PP spokesmen suggest this strengthened his hand against any further moves towards independence in the region.

Rajoy has already made clear that all the available forces of the state could be used against any such development, saying that "A democratic state functioning under the rule of law must use all of the instruments in its power to prevent this." He sought, and won, support from the PSOE for this position. Indeed, the PSOE were even more belligerent. One speaker denounced Ibarretxe's plan as "treason."

Aznar has the support of the bourgeois parties for this extension of the "war against terror" to broader democratic rights. This will start with the Basque region, but will apply more generally to the other regions of Spain as well. The government has already made clear how it regards popular opposition, having supported the war against Iraq in the face of 91% of the population opposed. The danger is that it will rail road any opposition by invoking the war against terrorism.

This has already been expressed in an editorial in *El Pais* (Friday 25th July): "Is it appropriate to open the debate and start negotiations while the terrorists of ETA are able to threaten that half of the Basque population that does not favour independence in order to gain political concessions? This proposal, *or any other* can only be debated fully and openly once ETA has laid down its arms and promised an end to all violence and intimidation against those who do not support its ideals" (emphasis added). The war against terror is seen as sanctioning any action by the state.

Aznar is actively seeking to use the bombing campaign as a pretext for the wider suppression of democratic rights. Where the PNV expressed anxiety that the government's actions would drive alienated youth away from parliamentary politics, the PP government has actively pursued that aim. It embraces terrorist actions as they reinforce its demands for wider state powers. The bombing campaign, conducted by an organization whose political weakness has been undermined further by an international clampdown, serves only to strengthen and sustain the government's attacks.

ETA has been seriously destabilized by the international seizure of assets and arrests of suspected terrorists. Some 200 suspected members have been arrested in the past 18 months, and the rate of detentions is increasing. The average age of the membership has dropped because of the rate of arrests. Indicative of the crisis within ETA were reports in May that two senior members of the organisation, Raul Angel Fuentes and Jose Maria Zaldua, had requested to be allowed to renounce the use of arms and leave the group. The last similarly high-profile rejection of the organisation, by Dolores Gonzalez Catarain in 1986, led to her assassination by a punishment squad.

The French and Spanish authorities have increased their joint activities around the Basque region (which is split over both countries) over the last year, reviving memories of the "dirty war" waged against ETA by the Gonzalez government. (Between 1983 and 1987 paramilitary "Anti-Terrorist Liberation Groups," GAL, under the direct control of the government, waged a campaign of assassination and torture of suspected ETA members in Spain and France. They killed 28). It has been claimed that the recent arrest of three members of ETA in Cahors, 100 km north of Toulouse, along with the seizure of 200 kilos of explosives, has smashed the organisation's logistical command structure.

In another large-scale international action, ten people were also arrested in Mexico and Spain. Six Spaniards and three Mexicans were detained across Mexico pending extradition to Spain. A 71-year old was arrested in the Basque city of Guernica as part of the same operation against ETA's financial and logistical structure.

Bank accounts worth 900,000 Mexican pesos ($87,000) have been frozen as part of the investigation, which began last year and is continuing. The Spanish government has stated that Mexico has long been a refuge for ETA. Jose Luis Santiago, head of the organized crime division in the Mexican attorney general's office, made clear that Mexico had no intention of upsetting Spain or its allies in Washington: "With these actions we are showing Mexico will not be a land of impunity for any criminal groups ... especially those dedicated to terrorism."

Aznar has also received support across Europe. A few days before the Pamplona arrests, police at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport arrested a suspected member of ETA in connection with a failed bomb attack in Bilbao in September 2002. Two ETA members were killed in that bombing.

Dutch Justice Minister Piet Hein Donner has also approved the extradition to Spain of Juanra Rodriguez, who is suspected of providing information on possible attack targets to ETA. Rodriguez, who denies the charges, has started a legal bid to halt the extradition, fearing he will be tortured or killed in Spain. Donner dismissed the suggestion, but recent events and allegations indicate that his treatment in Spain may well be unjust.

Under the guise of fighting terror, the Aznar government is undermining the democratic rights of the Spanish people as a whole. This is the same government that contemptuously dismissed the opposition of the overwhelming majority of the population to support the war against Iraq. Far from combating this, however, ETA's activities are only aiding the government.

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