

Spain: Catalan nationalist sacked after meeting Basque separatists

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The first shots have been fired in the run-up to the Spanish general election on March 14. A political storm erupted after military intelligence was leaked to the press that pro-independence Catalan nationalist Josep Lluís Carod-Rovira, a senior member of the regional government, held secret meetings in France with leading members of the outlawed Basque separatist organisation ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna—Homeland and Freedom).

Carod-Rovira was forced to resign as *conseller de cap* (de facto regional prime minister) when news of his meeting with Mikel Albizu and Mikel Antza was published in the pro-government right-wing paper *ABC*. He had held the post since November's regional elections, when his Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC—the Catalan Republican Left) joined a coalition widely seen as a left alternative to the rule of the Popular Party (PP).

The ERC joined an electoral grouping of radicals, Greens and Stalinists, to govern with the *Parti Socialiste de Catalunya* (PSC). The PSC is the regional sister party of the social democratic *Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol* (PSOE).

Carod-Rovira was second in the Generalitat (the Catalan regional government) to the PSC's Pasqual Maragall. His meeting with the ETA members took place when Maragall was on holiday, leaving him effectively in charge. The meeting was apparently not sanctioned by his party.

Carod-Rovira has stated that the meeting took place at ETA's suggestion. He says that he wanted "to help contribute to the possibility that ETA might declare a ceasefire and stop its armed fight." It is widely believed that his aim was to ensure an end to ETA bombings in Catalonia.

The meeting was monitored by the National

Intelligence Centre (CNI), which passed a report to the office of Spain's prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar. Details were not released straight away, but the leak to *ABC* was timed for the beginning of the election campaign. The liberal daily newspaper *El Pais* notes that one of the two people likely to see the CNI's report was Aznar's personal secretary Javier Zarzalejos. Zarzalejos is a member of the Government Committee for Intelligence Affairs and also the brother of *ABC*'s editor.

When the news was made public Mariano Rajoy, the PP's candidate to succeed Aznar, made it clear that the real target was not the individual but the "unviable" Catalan tripartite government.

The PP government has used the threat of ETA and its own "war on terror" to justify additional police powers, which will be used to stifle any opposition to its policies. Batasuna, the parliamentary party closest to ETA, has become the first electoral party to be banned in Spain since the end of the Franco regime.

The impact of globalisation and the domestic economic crisis in Spain has been to accelerate the centrifugal forces tearing apart the country's 17 autonomous regions. Against this the government has made clear its determination to reinforce the centralised Spanish state by criminalising any form of political opposition which even discusses regional autonomy. Aznar has also recently introduced legislation making it illegal to hold any referendum on extending the autonomy enshrined in the 1978 Constitution. This law carries a prison sentence.

Pasqual Maragall recently said that certain elements in government preferred to keep ETA alive "like a scarecrow," because of the opportunity this affords them for extending their powers.

For all his protestations that the meeting was aimed at

securing a ceasefire, Carod-Rovira's regionalism provides no alternative to Aznar. The PSC, which cannot maintain its grip on the Generalitat without the ERC, has sought to distance itself from the meeting, calling it a unilateral action of the ERC. They pushed Carod-Rovira to resign while at the same time moving to have his duties as *conseller de cap* covered by other ERC members. Carod-Rovira remains in the Generalitat as a minister without portfolio.

This has further exacerbated tensions between the PSC and the PSOE nationally. Relations were already strained after November's election. Sections of the PSOE wanted the PSC to do a deal with moderate nationalists to keep the Esquerra Republicana out of government. There was concern that a coalition with Esquerra would undermine the PSOE's critical support for the government, particularly on the question of the regions and on terrorism, while sections of the PSC were keen to assert their independence of the national party.

Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, general secretary of the PSOE and their prime ministerial candidate in the forthcoming election, immediately called for Carod-Rovira's resignation. He denounced the "act of intolerable disloyalty" in not seeking Maragall's approval.

The PSOE asked how the information was leaked to the press and demanded to know why, if state intelligence officers had known about the meeting, there were no moves to arrest the ETA members? Their stated concern was that this leak could jeopardise the CNI's sources.

The PP has said that there will be no investigation of the leak and has denounced anyone who mentions the leak as an aide of ETA. Manuel Fraga, a founder of the PP when it emerged from the wreck of Francoism, has defended the use of military intelligence against political adversaries. "If there is a person such as Carod-Rovira, who states publicly that it is necessary to separate Catalonia from Spain and break the Constitution, then it is natural that the government needs to know where he is ... so all Spaniards can know the truth about his contacts with ETA."

Until his appointment as prime ministerial candidate last September, Mariano Rajoy chaired the Intelligence Affairs Committee. This body decides on the targets of surveillance, and would have approved observation of

Carod-Rovira.



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