

ETA ceasefire in Catalonia

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A partial ceasefire by the Basque separatist organisation Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Homeland and Freedom—ETA) has laid bare the cynical nature of regional politics in Spain.

In a statement broadcast on Basque radio last week, the banned group informed “the Basque and Catalan people of the suspension of its campaign of armed action in Catalonia as of January 1, 2004”. The statement said that ETA “wishes to strengthen links between [the Basque and Catalan] peoples.”

ETA has declared 11 ceasefires since it began its campaign of armed action in the 1960s, but this is the first time it has declared a partial, local ceasefire. Earlier in the month ETA had announced its intention of escalating its bombing campaign against tourist sites. Henceforth, they announced, tourist sites would be targeted all year round and not just during the summer season.

ETA’s stated aim is the establishment of an independent Basque state, formed of the Basque regions of north-western Spain as well as parts of southern France. To this end it has targeted Spanish holiday resorts in an attempt to undermine the tourist industry (which accounts for 12 percent of Spain’s GDP) and force the government into negotiations over its demands.

Catalonia’s Mediterranean coast had long been a target. A bomb in a Barcelona shopping mall in 1987 killed 21 people. The statement last week referred to attacks since the 1980s against French and Spanish interests in Catalonia, but said that the political climate had now changed. ETA appealed to the growth of Catalan separatism, and drew parallels between Catalonia and the Basque region, which are “two nations oppressed by the French and Spanish states.”

At November’s regional elections in Catalonia, the pro-independence Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) held the balance of power when no party emerged with a clear majority. They went into a coalition with the regional social democratic party and an electoral grouping of left parties, Greens and Stalinists. The ERC’s Josep Lluís Carod-Rovira took his place as regional prime minister, second only to Pasqual Maragall of the Partit Socialista de Catalunya (PSC), the sister party of the national Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE). When Maragall was away, Carod-Rovira was the effective head of the regional government.

This marked a definite shift in the politics of the region. For the whole of its existence since the end of the Franco

dictatorship, the Catalan Generalitat (regional parliament) had been presided over by the moderate nationalist Convergència i Unió (CiU). The CiU had become increasingly tainted by its government coalition and support for the national right wing government of the Partido Popular (PP).

The decline in the votes of the CiU and the PSC, and the moderate increase in the PP’s vote, meant that no party had an overall majority. The coalition government that replaced the CiU was widely seen as some sort of left alternative to the politics of the PP. At the same time, pro-independence forces saw their key role in the coalition as allowing them to set the political agenda. ETA’s statement suggests that this was being taken seriously in the Basque region too.

Then barely a month ago, in a campaign involving leaked intelligence material being used against him, Carod-Rovira was forced to resign over a secret meeting he held with leading ETA members. There were allegations that he was trying to negotiate the sort of partial ceasefire that has now been declared. He was cagey about the content of the meeting, and said that he had been trying to negotiate a general end to the campaign of violence.

The PP timed the release of the material to maximise its impact on the campaign for March 14’s general election. (Campaigning proper started on February 27). The PP denounced the PSOE for their regional alliances, and continues to insist that there can be no extension of the autonomies granted to Spain’s 17 regions under the 1978 post-Franco constitution. The dispute highlighted differences between the PSOE and the PSC, but the PSOE nationally was quick to reassert its anti-ETA credentials.

The current ETA statement is, at the very least, highly suggestive of Carod-Rovira’s negotiations, and the PP’s response has been predictable. Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar said that the government unequivocally rejected “any kind of negotiation except for one in which [ETA] surrender their arms,” pledging to “continue pursuing the terrorists inside and outside Spain.”

Interior Minister Angel Acebes, describing it as a “trap for democracy”, said the government would continue to hunt down ETA “on the basis of the law, both in Catalonia and in the rest of Spain.”

Both of these warnings should be taken seriously. The PP has been quick to exploit the reactionary terror attacks of ETA to

reinforce the police and restrict democratic rights across Spain. Batasuna, the electoral wing of ETA, was banned, the first party to be banned in Spain since the end of the Franco regime.

The success of this policy can be seen from the extent to which other parties have embraced the PP's stance against the Basque separatists. Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, head of the PSOE, called the selective ceasefire "inadmissible". Having previously come under fire because of the PSC's pact with the ERC, Zapatero was keen to criticise Carod-Rovira for trying to gain votes from the agreement. "I lament," said Zapatero, "that a message from ETA is being used in electoral politics for the first time in the history of Spain's democracy."

The Stalinist-led coalition Izquierda Unida (IU), which has not always gone along with the populist campaigns against ETA, also joined in the chorus. The IU's Gaspar Llamazares said the only statement he wanted from ETA was "one saying it has broken up and stopped all armed activity in all of Spain."

Significantly, the ceasefire has met opposition from many nationalist politicians. In Catalonia Maragall called it a "perversion" to use death to divide the people of Spain. Basque regional premier Juan Jose Ibarretxe, of the moderate Basque National Party (PNV), called it politically sickening and ethically immoral. Ibarretxe last year put forward proposals that would considerably extend Basque autonomy. "In the name of Basque society", he demanded a definitive end to all ETA's violence.

This ceasefire is the first since the 14-month suspension of violence in 1998-9. At that time, with popular support beginning to decline, ETA sought an invitation to government negotiations. Aznar, though, refused to negotiate anything beyond disarmament and the transfer of prisoners to Basque jails. Disappointed, ETA returned to bombings.

Since that time there have been a number of changes. Popular hostility to an often-random campaign of violence has increased. Aznar has manipulated this consensus to win backing for his extension of police measures. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York on 11 September 2001, such a campaign lost any credibility as a political strategy.

When the US administration seized on the "war against terror" as its pretext for subsequent interventions, Aznar was quick to identify its possibilities for domestic use. Spain has since collaborated extensively with police agencies internationally, coordinating actions in France, Holland, Venezuela and Mexico in the last year alone. Aznar has won key support from the US and the European Union for extending his war on ETA.

The impact on ETA has been huge. Its assets have been frozen, and arrests continue apace against those suspected of membership. Some 200 members had been arrested in the 18 months prior to last summer's bombing campaign. The age of those arrested has dropped rapidly as arrests outstrip recruitment. This ceasefire smacks of a desperate attempt to get back in with the electoral pro-independence parties before it is

too late.

While the Spanish economy has maintained the highest level of growth within the European Union, this has been on the basis of poorly paid jobs and EU subsidies. Unemployment still remains the highest within the EU. Expansion of the EU to include countries in Eastern Europe threatens Spain's privileged status as subsidy recipient and home of cheap labour. Major corporations are already beginning to move production eastwards. The incoming government will have to address this loss of revenue by smashing social conditions.

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the PP should wish to place their opposition to regionalism at the centre of the election. By dressing it up as the "war against terror", they seek to continue exploiting the long-standing consensus they have achieved with the support of the PSOE. In this, ETA has once more provided an invaluable service to the PP.

Faced with the undermining of national power, the regional bourgeoisies seek their own deals with international corporations and financial bodies. This is the role that Carod-Rovira saw within Catalonia, and this is what Ibarretxe is aiming at in the Basque region. The Basque region already has taxation powers, uniquely among the autonomous regions, but Ibarretxe wishes to negotiate directly with the EU. The ERC want Catalonia to have taxation rights comparable to the Basques, and are looking to create a "Euro-region" for inward investment.

This development is not confined to these two regions alone, nor is it solely the province of ostensibly nationalist parties. In Galicia, for example, the regional PP government wants to negotiate its own fishing rights with Brussels. Such deals will have equally disastrous results for the mass of people in those regions.



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