

Spain: Zapatero continues Aznar's anti-democratic measures in regions

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When March's general election swept the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government of Jose Maria Aznar from power, the incoming social democratic government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero was given a cautious welcome by nationalist and regionalist parties in Spain's 17 autonomous regions.

One of his first moves after the PSOE (Socialist Workers Party of Spain) took office, for example, was to telephone Basque *lehendakari* (regional premier) Juan Jose Ibarretxe to resume political relations. Ibarretxe had not spoken to Aznar for two years. Zapatero has also agreed that parliament should discuss the regions annually (there has not been such a debate since 1997). Zapatero has, though, shown a determination to sustain elements of Aznar's policies—particularly towards the Basques—suggesting that relations are likely to worsen.

Immediately after the election, the Stalinist-dominated United Left (Izquierda Unida or IU) signed an “accord for political pluralism” with many of the regional parties. At a press conference to launch the accord, regionalists like the moderate Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), which heads the regional government, and the Galician National Bloc (BNG), welcomed an end to the “steamrolling and authoritarianism” of the Aznar government. In a separate statement, the PNV hailed “an end to the PP's policy of confrontation, division and no dialogue”.

It was quickly apparent what the nationalist organisations hoped to win from the incoming government. Three of the “left nationalist” parties (the Basque Eusko Alkartasuna, Aragon's Chunta Aragonesista and the Catalan Republican Left) issued an open letter calling for changes in national plurality, cultural and language policy. This was to be achieved through greater development of the country's federal structure, that is, greater regional devolution of powers.

The regional parties have as their goal the establishment of direct negotiating rights with transnational corporations and the European Union. During the negotiations over making up the additional votes required to give Zapatero a clear majority for election as prime minister, many of the regional parties made this clear. The Canary Islands Coalition deputies, for example, announced that they would make their decision on the basis of Zapatero's assurances on EU subsidies. In Galicia, even the PP's own regional politicians were seeking the right to direct negotiation of fishing deals with the EU.

The PP government nationally sought to use regional tensions as an excuse for repressive legislation to clamp down on all domestic dissent. Aznar regarded demands for greater regional autonomy as treasonable. Legislation was recently introduced making it a criminal offence to hold a referendum on extending autonomous rights without prior approval from the national government. This legislation applies to all the regions, but in practice it was intended to suppress proposals by Ibarretxe aimed at extending fiscal and political autonomy in the Basque region. Aznar made eager use of the “war against terror” against the Basque separatist organisation ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna or Basque Homeland and Freedom), and exploited ETA's terrorist campaign to justify suppressing domestic dissent. The parliamentary Basque separatist party Batasuna, accused of links to ETA, became the first party to be banned since the end of General Franco's military dictatorship.

In opposition, the PSOE was prepared to countenance some extension of autonomous rights within the framework of the Spanish state, for some regions. The PSOE nationally was reasonably sympathetic to such an extension of autonomy in Catalonia, for example, where its regional sister party, the PSC, entered a coalition government with the Catalan Republican Left (ERC). The PSOE took a more critical position on Basque regionalism, however, although its support for reform of the Catalan statute had been an important factor in further encouraging Basque separatist tendencies. Whilst prepared to discuss amendments to the present constitution, the PSOE was hostile to the wholesale reforms of regional autonomy being proposed by Ibarretxe.

The Basque regional government refused to withdraw Ibarretxe's plan when the PSOE's regional sister party, the PSE, proposed a new negotiating process along the lines of the Catalan model. A regional spokeswoman demanded to know what had changed: “Why should we withdraw the plan? ... Just because the Socialists won the election?” She also demanded to know if the PSE would recognise Euskadi (the region identified as the Basque country) “as a nation” or not.

The PNV made clear its intentions to push the matter through the regional parliament. The PNV's Antonio Rubalkaba, head of the commission involved, ignored the parliamentary ruling that only one vote was allowed on the whole plan. Instead, to

increase the likelihood of the plan being accepted, he agreed to votes being cast on each amendment and shouted down opposition.

Upon the announcement of Zapatero's victory, the PNV pointed to the PSOE's years of loyal support for the PP government, saying that this would be a legacy that would not disappear overnight. The clearest example of this was the Anti-Terrorist Pact in 2000. In signing up to the pact, which was aimed at ETA, the PSOE endorsed the PP's suppression of democratic rights in the Basque region. After the election, the PNV cited the pact specifically as an agreement that would need to be overturned. They said the serious curbs on freedom it had created would need to be reversed.

The PSOE's immediate response was that nothing would change. It has now gone further, and brought the PP into discussions to reinforce its maintenance of the pact. The meeting was the first since the creation of the pact to be attended by the head of the government. A PSOE spokesman said the meeting "served to reinforce the unity of the principal parties against terrorism".

At the meeting criticisms of the previous government made by Interior Minister Jose Antonio Alonso were withdrawn. Alonso had suggested that "lack of political foresight" by the PP may have contributed to the March 11 terror bombings in Madrid. Attempts by the PP government to deny the possibility of al-Qaeda involvement in the bombings, and pin responsibility on ETA, became the focus of the popular upsurge of hostility that swept the PP from office.

The PP's leader Mariano Rajoy has promised his party will remain "loyal" to the pact. The parties have agreed to meet every six months on this issue, or whenever either party has a request to analyse new developments.

Although the pact now addresses the possibility of al-Qaeda attacks, it was stressed that it relates to the terrorist threat both foreign and domestic. The Basque regional government has noted that the pact's preamble refers more often to the PNV and EA than it does to ETA. ETA is at its weakest point for many years.

While Zapatero made clear his refusal to discuss with ETA, a forum of nationalist parties, including representatives of Batasuna, called for the creation of a committee to discuss peace. The forum did not call for a ceasefire, but ETA has not been active since the bombings in Madrid. Recent press reports suggest that there have been discussions around the Ibarretxe plan. Publicly ETA has dismissed the plan, which does not allow for independence, although there are unconfirmed reports that sections of the organisation favour a deal with parliamentary nationalists.

Zapatero has also been able to win support for the extradition of ETA suspects from countries that had hitherto refused. After Zapatero met with Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, the Belgian authorities agreed to extradite Jon Lopez Gomez and Diego Ugarte Lopez de Arkaute, arrested in Bossu in March. Belgian

courts also agreed to reopen the cases of Luis Moreno and Raquel Garcia, who have been living in Belgium since the early 1990s. The Belgian appeals court ruled in March that the Spanish had provided insufficient evidence to merit extradition, but the cases have now been reopened.

The agreement on the pact has also allowed the two parties to reach an accord on continuing other aspects of Aznar's policy regarding regional matters. The PP had pursued Batasuna and its members through the courts, banning offspring parties as soon as they appeared. The meeting between Zapatero and Rajoy also saw them agree to ban a new party, Herriaren Zerrenda (HZ), from standing in the European elections. Accused of being controlled by Batasuna, HZ has been annulled by the Supreme Court.

HZ was launched as a direct appeal to the European Union, in whose revised constitution HZ, like many other regional parties across Spain, sees its future. "We believe that the coming elections offer us an opportunity ... to show Europe that Euskal Herria [the Basque country] is a European nation," HZ's statement said. It spoke of "reinforcing the national plan," but made clear that the independent Basque region was seen as part of a European trading bloc. "[T]he model for the building of the new European Union will condition the future of Euskal Herria."

Acting on the government's appeal, the Supreme Court initially withheld the voters' list from HZ—on suspicion that it was a terrorist organisation. (Rajoy said after his meeting with Zapatero that Batasuna was a terrorist organisation, and pointed by way of evidence to the support Aznar was able to win for this position from the EU and the United States).

The Supreme Court then ruled that HZ was run by Batasuna on the basis of, among other things, the collection of signatures required by law for participation in the election. (HZ collected some 49,000 signatures in the Spanish Basque region). This is a continuation of the suppression of democratic rights begun by the Aznar government, in denying a parliamentary voice to some 10 percent of the regional population.

HZ is calling upon its supporters to vote using ballot papers from across the border in France. (When Batasuna was first banned, its supporters voted using home-made ballot papers).



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