

Main Basque nationalist party suffers losses in Spanish regional elections

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The coalition government of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and the Eusko Alkartasuna (EA) won the elections held in the Basque region April 17, but lost their overall majority, mainly as a result of advances by the Socialist Party and the regional Communist Party.

The PNV-EA coalition won 29 of the 75 seats (four less than in the previous elections), gaining just over 38 percent of the vote. The Socialist Party (PSOE) came in second with 18 seats (gaining five seats). The right-wing Popular Party (PP) finished with 15 seats (a loss of four seats) and the recently established Communist Party of the Basque Territories won nine seats.

The elections had been advanced by PNV leader and regional president Juan José Ibarretxe as a referendum on his plans for greater autonomy for the Basque region. His proposals would end the constitutional arrangements established at the end of the Franco dictatorship by creating a “self-governing” Basque region in “free association” with Spain—effectively, a separate Basque state.

The PNV has always sought the creation of a regional Basque state (comprised initially of the three provinces that make up the Spanish Autonomous Region of the Basque Country) within the federal structures of the European Union.

It has traditionally been opposed by the Basque separatist Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Fatherland and Freedom—ETA) and the parliamentary party close to it, Batasuna. ETA has sought to use terrorist actions to force the bourgeoisie to concede a separate Basque state comprising the Basque Country provinces, the Spanish Autonomous Region of Navarre, and the three Basque provinces of southern France.

But in the wake of the Madrid railway bombing on March 3, 2004, Batasuna shifted behind the PNV’s proposals. The Basque Assembly approved the plan on December 30 because three of the assembly’s six Batasuna deputies—now acting under the name of Sozialista Abertzaleak (SA)—voted for it. However, the Spanish National Assembly overwhelmingly rejected the plan in March. Ibarretxe subsequently announced that he would bring forward the regional elections, with the aim of using them as a referendum on his proposals.

The Ibarretxe plan aims to establish a place for the Basque bourgeoisie within the transnational market place. Article 56 upholds “the right to private property and a respect for the freedom of enterprise within the framework of the market economy,” whilst Article 37 enshrines “free enterprise and the creation of wealth” and “participation in companies and inter-company cooperation” as the economic basis for a “self-governing” Basque region.

The proposals advocate changing the region’s relationship with Spain in order to facilitate the consolidation of direct relations

between the Basque bourgeoisie, major international corporations and investors, and the European Union. Under the 1978 constitution, Spain was subdivided into 17 regions, each with a limited degree of regional autonomy.

The 1978 constitution marked the transition from the dictatorship of General Franco to bourgeois democracy, and was aimed at preventing the Spanish working class from settling scores with Francoism. Those areas with stronger nationalist groups (the Basque Country and Catalonia, primarily) were thus granted greater degrees of financial independence and autonomy as a means of dividing the working class and tying it to a regionalist programme.

The degree of autonomy achieved by the Basque bourgeoisie under the 1979 Statute of Guernica was extensive. Of all the Autonomous Communities, the Basques have had the greatest control over taxation, education, health and policing. But Ibarretxe’s proposals take this much further. The region would have “exclusive powers to organise and plan economic activities.” Basque institutions would be responsible for the “promotion and fostering of economic development in the Community of the Basque Country.” The Basque bourgeoisie would thus control every aspect of financial and political life—the proposals are explicit on regional control over infrastructure and banking—without having to defer to central government.

According to the plan, the Basque institutions “may draw up agreements and cooperation treaties with public and private institutions” wherever they are. This goes to the heart of the PNV’s ambitions, which are for a Basque region with independent international negotiation rights.

The PNV has long demanded direct representation to the European Union. The party’s leadership in exile participated at the 1948 Hague Congress, seeking recognition of national status. Article 65 of the PNV proposals enshrines this “active participation ... in the decision-making procedures” of the EU, and also “effective participation ... in the preparation, programming, distribution and execution of community funds.” Articles 67-69 would authorise Basque institutions to negotiate international treaties and agreements.

The reasons for this are not too difficult to discern. Article 49 lists those areas for which the regional institutions would have responsibility. Broken into 20 groups, they include mining and energy systems, agriculture, industry, telecommunications, new technologies, scientific research and tourism.

This is a rich prize indeed. The regional bourgeoisie and its apologists often present a picture of the Basque region suffering as a result of its domination by Spain. But on the economic front, in particular, this is far from the case. From the late 19th century onwards, the region has played a key role in the national economy.

Based on steel and iron production, it attracted workers from all over Spain to its burgeoning shipbuilding and metallurgical industries. By the end of the Franco era, the Basque region was the most economically advanced in Spain, with some of the highest incomes.

Franco's death in 1975 coincided with a period of international economic crisis. Within the Basque region, some 170,000 jobs (25 percent of the workforce) were lost. Income per capita stagnated, and GDP declined 2 percent over the same period.

The response of the Spanish capitalists was to move towards closer ties with Europe, joining the European Union in 1986. The Basque regional bourgeoisie also oriented their trade towards other European countries and shifted away from heavy industry to service provision and tourism. Construction now accounts for 44 percent of Basque GDP, while the services sector accounts for over half.

The region enjoyed an annual growth rate of 3.5 percent following Spanish accession to the EU. Exports tripled between 1994 and 2002, mainly to EU countries, although the rest of Spain continued to be the main market. In 1986, the region's income stood at 86 percent of the EU's average. By the end of 2001, this had reached 106 percent, while Spain's overall figure still stood at 84 percent. GDP has continued to grow, with figures for 2004 suggesting regional growth of 3 percent, as against a national figure of 2.7 percent and a EU-wide average of 2 percent.

This has been based not only on the region's pre-eminence within the Spanish economy, but also on the concessions extracted since 1979 by the regional bourgeoisie. The Basque region generates nearly 7 percent of total Spanish GDP. However, unlike other high-GDP regions (such as Madrid or Catalonia), it does not pay into national funds for redistribution to poorer Autonomous Communities in the south. In fact, it has been a recipient of this redistribution fund: in 2000 it received €232 per person.

This kind of largesse from the central Spanish government to one of its most economically prosperous regions is unlikely to last. Under current EU plans, the 2007-2013 budget is likely to cut aid to Spain—currently still the largest recipient of EU funds—by half, in order to subsidise the newly incorporated east European countries. This largely accounts for plans for greater autonomy.

Ibarretxe's proposals, though shrouded in the language of "self-determination," aim not at protecting the rights of Basque working people, but at selling them cheap to the European bourgeoisies and the transnational corporations. Business leaders are warning that employment conditions must change for the region to remain competitive.

Ramon Knorr, of the regional business confederation Confebask, has already supported longer working hours. Some 26.3 percent of all employment contracts are temporary, and 92.5 percent of all contracts signed in the region last year were temporary. Between 1995 and 2002, employment costs rose by 56 percent, whilst company profits rose by three times that figure. One of the models Ibarretxe has cited for the Basque region is Puerto Rico.

The plans for de-facto independence have not been put off the agenda by the electoral losses suffered by the PNV-EA. Though theoretically the Socialist Party and the PP could combine to form a government, this is unlikely. Instead the PP regionally and nationally has lashed out at the Socialist Party and claimed that it is responsible for what is, in effect, a win for ETA.

Alternatively, the PNV could join forces with the Socialist Party to secure a majority, which would mean abandoning plans for independence from Spain for the immediate future. But it could still

get its plans passed by risking an alliance with the Communist Party of the Basque Territories.

This party benefited from a call to vote for it by the Batasuna party and a new political party, "All the Options" (Aukera Guztiak-AG), which were both banned for their alleged ties with ETA. The PP had also called for a ban on the regional Communist Party, but this was rejected after an investigation by state lawyers ruled that no link with ETA could be proved. The Communist Party of the Basque Territories actually did better than Batasuna's seven seats in 2001.

The ban on AG was imposed, using the Political Parties Act that severely curtails the democratic rights of free association and free speech. It not only allows the judiciary to ban any party that is deemed to encourage "hatred and violence," but also those who encourage "social confrontation" or "challenge the legitimacy of democratic institutions" and "promote a culture of civil confrontation." Batasuna (People's Unity) was banned in 2003 amidst allegations it was the political wing of ETA. ETA has killed more than 800 people, mainly Spanish policeman and local and national politicians, over the last 30 years in pursuit of its goal.

Ibarretxe criticised the ban on AG, describing it as "a political decision taken by the PSOE and PP so that there was not a nationalist majority at the Basque parliament."

The elections mean that the balance of power that was previously held by Batasuna now rests with the regional Communist Party. This party was founded in 2002 and announced prior to the election that it would campaign for the programmes of Batasuna and AG in the Basque assembly.

Workers in the Basque Country must reject all forms of regionalism and separatism and take up a conscious fight to unite with their class brothers and sisters throughout Spain. Against Ibarretxe's attempts to tie them to the capitalist European Union, they must counterpose the United Socialist States of Europe. This is the only basis for overcoming the division of the continent into rival nation states, and facilitating the development of the productive forces of the entire continent under the democratic control of the working class, rather than big business and the financial elite.



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