

Banned Basque demonstration attacked by police

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Around 20 people were injured when police fired tear gas and rubber bullets to break up a demonstration in the Basque city of San Sebastian on Sunday, August 14. The demonstration was called by the Basque separatist party Batasuna.

Batasuna, a parliamentary party, was banned in 2003 for its alleged links with the separatist terrorist organisation ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom). It was the first time a political party had been banned in Spain since the end of the dictatorship of General Franco in 1975.

Batasuna called the demonstration under the slogan “People Now, Peace Now” to coincide with the beginning of San Sebastian’s Semana Grande street festival. They have held demonstrations at both of the previous Semana Grande festivals since the party was banned. Bans on the previous demonstrations were overturned on appeal to the regional Supreme Court.

On this occasion, the ban was upheld by the regional government headed by the moderate nationalists of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). The Basque Interior Ministry declared the march illegal, as the law banning Batasuna also prevented it from holding rallies. This amounted to support for the undemocratic measures of the Political Parties Act.

The Interior Ministry also said that previous Batasuna demonstrations that had been permitted had resulted in violence. When Batasuna appealed, the Basque Supreme Court upheld the ministry’s decision by two votes to one. Batasuna announced that the demonstration should go ahead anyway in protest at the undemocratic measures. Estimates of the number taking part vary from 1,000, according to official sources, to Batasuna’s claim of 5,000.

The demonstration was prevented from taking its intended route through downtown San Sebastian,

passing instead through the city’s Old Quarter. The police attacked the march when it attempted to head down San Sebastian’s main boulevard. Police arrested eight people, who are to face charges relating to public disturbance, criminal damage, illegal demonstration and attacking the authorities. Askatasuna, the nationalist political prisoners’ organisation, has alleged that those arrested were placed in solitary confinement, although the Basque police deny this.

Javier Balza, the Basque interior minister, had promised beforehand that the police would be deployed to stop the rally. He had warned that in the event of trouble they would intervene “with the use of force.”

The ban has also been supported by voices sympathetic to the Socialist Party (PSOE) government. An editorial in the pro-PSOE daily *El Pais* argued that banning Batasuna did not deprive its followers of their “individual rights to express their views in public places.” It called for further repressive measures against Batasuna, demanding that the organisation “must now be made to answer for the personal and material damage caused.”

The judge who voted in favour of Batasuna’s appeal did so on the grounds that the banning of the party should not deny its members the democratic right to demonstrate. When Arnaldo Otegi, Batasuna’s spokesman, announced the rally would go ahead as a “debate on freedom,” he declared that “Democratic rights are above legal considerations.”

Otegi noted that demonstrations are “banned in totalitarian and fascist systems, so infringing the right we have to demonstrate here in the Basque Country is a fascist move.” Defending the democratic right to demonstrate, Otegi said, “We are not concerned about what the [Spanish] Constitution or the Spanish Criminal Court may say.”

However, Batasuna's perspective is limited to the impact of the legislation on the Basque region. A statement by the party attacked the Basque Interior Ministry's decision to uphold the ban as being aimed at "giving the Basque nationalist left a beating." Its defence of democratic rights is subordinated to a separatist agenda that serves to divide Basque workers from workers across the rest of Spain and so facilitates an attack that threatens the democratic rights of everyone.

Batasuna is seeking an accommodation with the central government that gives it a place in a devolved regional government similar to that achieved by Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland. The aim of the march, Otegi was reported as saying, was to push for Batasuna to be included in proposed all-party talks on resolving conflict in the region. Batasuna stated that the march was "within the context of the new paths that need to be built on the road to democracy and peace."

Batasuna, like ETA, has as its goal the creation of a separate Basque state comprising the Basque Autonomous Region, Navarre and the French Basque country. However, after the Madrid bombing of March 3, 2004, ETA's perspective of pressuring the bourgeoisie into conceding such a state through terrorist action looked less and less convincing. Sections of Batasuna moved behind the PNV's proposals for a "self-governing" Basque region, comprising initially only the Spanish Basque Autonomous Region, in "free association" with Spain. Sections of ETA have proposed a ceasefire and an end to their bombing activities.

Otegi spoke of "left-wing nationalists" having made "many efforts to achieve peace," citing ETA's willingness to negotiate with the government and its restraint in not attacking public positions. After the attack on the demonstration, Batasuna's Joseba Alvarez said that this kind of policing was "not the way to take this process forward."

The indications are that the PNV (which lost strength at the last election) is keen to achieve a rapprochement with Batasuna. Regional premier Juan José Ibarretxe gave a press conference this week in which he told Batasuna that steps had to be taken to go from "a culture of confrontation to a culture of mutual understanding." He expressed his hope that they would in time be able to achieve this and open up a "new era."

The PNV's Joseba Egibar described the August 14 events as "water under the bridge." He said that the Spanish government was "very interested" in "butting into Basque politics" and attempting to break up the Basque coalition government. As such, the PNV will need to look for allies within the nationalist and separatist sphere.



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