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Basque Country

Huge march advances struggle for peace, national rights

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For decades the People's Party (PP) of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has believed it has a reliable gun in its political holsterâ€”unbending opposition to anything that could be portrayed as linked to Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA), the left-nationalist armed organisation responsible for more than 800 deaths in its 50-year-long fight against the Spanish state.

However, since ETA's declaration two years ago of a permanent ceasefire, this particular weapon has started to backfire on the Spanish state's ruling conservative party.

The latest Deusto Barometro survey of social attitudes, produced by the University of Deusto, showed just how much. Of those interviewed 16% thought ETA itself "was helping consolidate peace in Euskadi [the Basque Country] a lot or somewhat", as against only 6% for the PP (less than the vote that party gets in Basque Country elections). ETA itself was judged to be doing more for peace and reconciliation than the Association of Victims of Terrorism (AVT), the terrorism victims' group closest to the PP (14%).

The party that was felt to be doing most to heal wounds was the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), presently governing in Euskadi, (at 39%), followed by the left-nationalist coalition EH Bildu (29%) and the Socialist Party of Euskadi (PSE), the Basque affiliate of the once social-democratic Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), at 26%. Only 10% thought the Rajoy administration was making any contribution to the peace process.

Despite this trend the PP government remains locked into its traditional ETA-hunting strategy, with the line that it has nothing to negotiate with the armed organisation. Unlike the peace processes in Ireland and South Africa, the PP is after a "final solution" with victors and vanquishedâ€”there will be no let-up from the Spanish state until ETA is forced to disarm and dissolve.

As for the hundreds of ETA prisoners in Spanish and French jails, they can qualify for early release or transfer to jails in Euskadi only if they individually recant and apologise. And, according to interior minister Jorge Fernández DÃ­az and Rajoy himself, prison policy will not change until ETA disappears.

In short, the Basque abertzale (patriotic) left may have definitively adopted peaceful methods of political struggle, but the Rajoy government has stepped up its intense legal and police war against abertzale organisations. Its latest assaults have deepened outrage within the broad nationalist community in Euskadi, a process which reached a new peak on January 11, 2014, when 130,000 people marched for "human rights, understanding and peace", and completely overflowed central Bilbao.

Background to January 11

The march, the biggest in Bilbao in living memory, was jointly convened by the parties forming EH Bildu (led by the abertzale left organisation Sortu), the PNV and the two nationalist trade union confederationsâ€”the Patriotic Workers Commissions (LAB), aligned with the abertzale left, and Basque Workers Union (ELA), aligned with the PNV.

The main spur to the turnout was popular anger with the January 8 arrest of the eight members of the Coordinating Group representing the Basque Political Prisoners' Collective (EPPK) and the raid of their offices on the grounds that the group is an "operational arm" of ETA. The arrestees, who have since been jailed, were two lawyers and six

former prisoners.

The protest was the first time in 15 years that the two wings of Basque nationalism had jointly called a demonstration, and partly explains why it was twice as large as the last nationalist mobilisation, the October 5, 2013 protest against the banning of the prisoner rights platform Herrera.

Josu Erkoreka, spokesperson for the Basque Country government, said: "The demonstration was so large because the vast majority of Basque society wants to stop frustration of the opportunity for peace."

The arrest of the EPPK eight followed on a December 31 EPPK declaration in support of the peaceful political strategy of the abertzale left and a January 4 press conference of 80 ETA ex-prisoners called to express their backing for it. Many of those present had recently been released after the decision of the European Court of Human Rights last October 21 that Spanish court decisions extending their sentences were in breach of European human rights law.

The EPPK declaration denounced the cruel treatment of Basque political prisoners and the Rajoy government's intransigence, while recognising "in all sincerity the suffering and damage to all sides generated as a result of the conflict" and envisaging individual solutions for individual ETA prisoners. This was a change from the previous EPPK stance of insistence on negotiations with the prisoners as a whole.

The arrest the EPPK eight came after they had already announced their role as mediators in explaining the prisoner association's new stance to social and political forces in Euskadi.

In a clear exposure of the political motivation behind the arrests, the Spanish interior ministry issued a media release before the operation had even begun. The police also raided the office of senator Iñaki Goioaga, elected on the left-nationalist ticket Amaiur in the 2011 Spanish national elections.

In response, the citizens' platform Tantz Tanta ("Drop by drop"), initiator of the march against Herrera's banning, announced on January 9 that it was calling a January 11 rally to protest the EPPK arrests and in support of the stalled peace process. The march's slogan would be, "Human rights, resolution, peace" "Basque prisoners to the Basque Country".

Initially, judge Pablo Ruz gave permission for the demonstration to take place, but when this ruling was referred to judge Eloy Velasco (responsible for the EPPK arrests) he reversed it, citing an alleged relation between Tantz Tanta and the banned Herrera. Tantz Tanta then called off the demonstration.

However, the social media in the Basque Country and Navarra immediately began buzzing with the hashtag, "I'm going". This expression of rising outrage forced the PNV, which had already condemned the arrests, to turn words into deeds. It negotiated a nice generic slogan for the demonstration with Sortu and the other nationalist forces involved "one which judge Velasco could find no grounds to reject" and the new mobilisation was announced at an emergency joint press conference.

Despite this change, no all-Spanish political forces, neither the PSE or Esker Anitza and Esker Batua, present and past Euskadi affiliates of the United Left (IU), took part in the march, even though the last two organisations had welcomed the EPPK declaration and condemned the arrests of the EPPK eight and the ban on the original Tantz Tanta protest.

Why the ban?

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What explains this latest judicial offensive, which actually banned a demonstration of the kind that was allowed while ETA was still carrying out armed attacks? Why was Tantz Tanta's demonstration against the outlawing of Herrira allowed and its march against the EPPK arrests banned?

In a December 18, 2013, interview with the Mexican daily La Jornada, Arnaldo Otegi, imprisoned Sortu national secretary in absentia, explained the main political factor that is always likely to produce such contradictions:

The government of Spain has no interest in peace. It doesn't want it and longs for the previous scenario in which the armed violence of ETA allowed it to brandish the indispensable "enemy within" so as to conceal its own deeply anti-democratic, anti-social and authoritarian nature. The disappearance of ETA's armed violence creates a serious problem for it, to the extent that there's now no excuse not to tackle the real political debate, which is none other than respect for the Basque people's right of self-determination.

In this new context the PP government has trashed the position of the Popular Alliance (AP), its forerunner, which in 1988 signed the Ajuria Enea agreement with the other main parliamentary parties in Euskadi. This agreement accepted that the end of ETA's armed struggle would see the release of all prisoners not involved in the deaths of victims of its attacks.

The Rajoy leadership has also become hostage to its tactic of relentless attack on the PSOE government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004-2011) for being "soft on terrorism" and of its financial and political boosting of the organisations of victims of terrorism closest to it.

According to Luis R. Aizpeolea, long-time analyst of ETA, the Association of Victims of Terrorism, which the PP built up to bludgeon Zapatero, has escaped its control. The association shops around for the best deal from competing right-wing Spanish-centralist outfits, with Rajoy facing three rivals ready to attack his government for the very same "softness" of which he accused his PSOE predecessor.

There's the PP's own internal "Tea Party", led by former prime minister José María Aznar and former premier of the Madrid region Esperanza Aguirre, who claim that "democracy has lost out to ETA" because "terrorists" have been elected to parliaments in Euskadi, Navarra and Madrid. They also imply that Basque nationalist support for Catalonia's right to decide its political relationship with Madrid represents a further spread of the terrorist virus. (Aznar advocates that Catalan premier Artur Mas be immediately jailed if he carries out an "illegal" referendum.)

There's the "tougher-on-terrorism-than-thou" Union for Progress and Democracy (UPyD) and, since last week, Vox, a new candidate for the anti-Basque and anti-Catalan vote, which includes ex-PPers and advocates defending the threatened unity of Spain by replacing its 17 "autonomous communities" (states) with "a unitary state with a single government and single parliament".

Last week, Rajoy moved to woo Association of Victims of Terrorism support by stating that he had never negotiated with ETA and never would. (A lie, the 1996-2004 Aznar government, in which Rajoy was a minister, moved 200 ETA prisoners to Basque Country jails after talks with ETA.) Rajoy added that he would study ways to ban released ETA prisoners from standing for public office. The PP will also try to reassert its anti-terrorist credentials by including a ceremony with victims of terrorism in its February national convention.

Reactions

The massive success of the Bilbao march put all parliamentary political forces in Euskadi, with the exception of EH Bildu, on the defensive. A PSE spokesperson said that "the PNV has got into this game [of alliance with Sortu] because its legs have been shaking for fear of losing hegemony within the nationalist electorate". For the PSE, the speaker of the Basque parliament, the PNV's Bakartxo Tejeria, should not have taken part in a march that did not represent an "inclusive political and social consensus".

But the PSE had no proposal of its own to make about advancing the peace process. And in Navarra, abstention by its sister Socialist Party of Navarra (PSN) actually allowed a motion condemning the Bilbao demonstration to pass

the regional parliament, against the opposition of Basque and Navarra nationalist forces and United Left.

Yet, given the rising pressure to at least be seen to be doing something for peace, PSE parliamentary spokesperson José Antonio Pastor announced that the party would consider returning to sittings of the PNV government's Peace Table, at present attended solely by the nationalist parties. Veteran PSOE leader Ramón Jauregui was similarly vague – "the Rajoy government should resist pressure from the right and "manage the issue of Basque prisoners in the most natural and intelligent way". For former premier Patxi López, "a few more than 500 ETA prisoners can't take up more time and attention than the 177,000 unemployed we have in Euskadi".

PNV president Andoni Ortuzar chose to stress that Sortu had been unable to control its own base, many of whom chanted slogans in support of ETA prisoners and the EPPK at what had been agreed would be a silent protest. Ortuzar was also at pains to underline that the demonstration did not represent "a new stage" in relations between the two wings of Basque nationalism, but "an exceptional response, motivated by an exceptional situation".

At the same time, the PNV government called on Madrid for a change in its prison policy. Spokesperson Erkoreka said after January 11 that "the increases in toughness applied in recent years are related to an idea of prison policy conceived as an additional instrument of anti-terrorist policy. [However], from the moment that ETA abandoned its arms, it makes no sense to maintain a prison policy in anti-terrorist mode."

To date, the PNV government has been very cautious in its dealings with the Rajoy administration, wary of repeating the 2005 defeat in the Spanish parliament of the proposal for a referendum on the relation of the Basque Country to Spain, advanced by former PNV premier Juan José Ibarretxe. Thus, while the PNV and premier Iñigo Urkullu support a new status for the Basque Country, this is conceived as coming "from dialogue, negotiation and agreement".

This approach is in clear contrast with that of Catalan premier Artur Mas, whose political options are being set by the vast surge of independence sentiment in Catalonia. Urkullu and the PNV are being reinforced in their prudence by the present loss of support for Mas's party, Convergence and Union (CiU). By opting to fight Madrid over Catalonia's right to decide the right-nationalist CiU has actually lost to its left, mainly to the centre-left nationalist Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC). Were Urkullu to choose to repeat the Mas approach in Euskadi, a similar shift in support from the PNV to the abertzale left could be anticipated.

However, this unstable balance may well have to change. If, as seems likely, Rajoy is determined to continue the war against Basque left nationalism, passivity from the PNV also runs the risk of losing support to its left.

Partly to avoid that scenario prominent figures within the PNV universe have taken to appealing to the Rajoy government's sense of own self-interest and of the ridiculous. Last week former premier José Antonio Ardanza described PP intransigence as "rather unintelligent" and commented: "When I hear 'everything is ETA', that means that a gentleman from ETA entered the Spanish Finance Ministry to the salute of the Civil Guard or whoever was at the door." This was a reference to Martin Garitano, EH Bildu member and head of the Gipuskoa provincial administration, who had recently visited Madrid to sign a tax agreement.

Yet if there's one thing the Rajoy government totally lacks, it's a sense of its own absurdity. All the signs are that it has decided that it has more to lose to its right than to its left – "its main challenge is to shore up Spanish-centralist support against the threat from the Union for Progress and Democracy (UPyD), Vox and its internal critics, not appear rational and consistent in its approach to Basque concerns.

This is despite tensions between the Euskadi PP branch and other parts of the organisation. For example, while the PP's "Tea Party" right sees ETA winning everywhere, for Basque PP president Arantza Quiroga, "ETA has been defeated" and the important job is for the Spanish and Basque governments to collaborate in assuring its final disappearance: "We cannot allow the abertzale left to lead the ending of ETA."

Gipuskoa PP president Borja Semper commented sarcastically on January 11: "Is Andoni Ortuzar new to politics? Is the PNV a party of greenhorns? They went to protest in the streets of Bilbao and they didn't guess what would happen? They didn't guess they would be a tool of the abertzale left to give legitimacy to certain demands?"

However, Semper's understanding offer to the PNV, despite its "mistake", was "to return to a scenario of calm, trust and basic shared positions" so that EH Bildu "will be forced to come over to democracy". At the same time, the PP in Euskadi is hoping that Rajoy finds the courage somewhere to stare down Aznar and Co.

In this atmosphere one thing is certain: the Spanish interior ministry will be digging for any dirt it can find for a renewed attempt to have Sortu already on a kind of good behaviour bond as a condition of its 2011 legalisation by the constitutional court outlawed. This effort will start with judge Velasco's "haul" of 30 boxes of documentation from the raids on Herrera and the EPPK.

As for Sortu itself, its valuation of January 11 was direct: "The Spanish state is a cesspit of human rights ... it's only offer to the Basque Country is rejection and denial... [But].the 130,000 of us who demonstrated yesterday showed that with forces united this country is unstoppable..."

"From now on the challenge is to make sure that yesterday wasn't a one-day bloom, but the beginning of the united work that this people needs."

Conclusion " on the Catalan road?

Will January 11 mark the beginning of a new rise in independence sentiment in Euskadi, a Basque version of the million-strong July 2010 Barcelona protest against the Spanish constitutional court's ruling against sections of 2006 Catalan statute?

Sizeable differences between the Basque and Catalan situations counsel a cautious response here. First, because the Basque Country and Navarra still enjoy a special fiscal relationship with the Spanish state. This allows the two regions to collect their own tax income, keep what is judged necessary to fund their spending and then then forward an agreed amount to the national treasury. A 2011 study by the BBVA Foundation claimed that this arrangement meant Navarra and Euskadi were the two autonomous communities most favoured by present Spanish fiscal arrangements. Also, the impact of the economic crisis in the Basque regions, while still sharp, has so far been less disastrous than elsewhere.

Second, while the treatment of ETA prisoners causes concern beyond the nationalist community—the Deusto Barómetro shows only 12.3% in favour of no change in the status of ETA prisoners—it remains to be seen whether the issue can mobilise higher levels of community support than achieved so far.

Third, while two recent polls show 50%-55% want either independence or more autonomy for Euskadi (20%-25% and 30% respectively), it is not yet clear whether this sentiment can be transformed into a mobilised demand for a Basque right to decide (Euskadi's version of the 2012 and 2013 million-plus demonstrations on Catalan National Day).

According to Deusto Barómetro at present only 9% rate the relationship with Spain as Euskadi's most important issue. A planned Via Vasca, along the lines of last September's 1.6 million-strong Via Catalana, will help show how reliable that figure is.

However, even with these cautions stated, the situation in Spain's Basque lands remains volatile. The social and economic crisis, which is now striking at the previously solid pillars of the Euskadi economy, such as the world-famous Mondragon cooperative, must keep flowing over into the national question, intensifying the sentiment that Euskadi is best out of Spain or part of a very different Spain.

In Navarra, the ruling coalition of the corrupt, pseudo-nationalist Union of the People of Navarra and PP is kept in power by Socialist Party of Navarra abstention and seems certain to fall at the next regional elections, if not before.

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Most immediately, the escalating conflict between Catalonia and the Rajoy government will continue to create a deep impression in Basque Country politics. Any advance for a Catalan right to decide can only inspire the Basques who have suffered so much at the hands of the same enemy.

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