

ETA Loses Its Voice



Will the Spanish parliament's decision to ban the Basque political party Batasuna lead to it and its sister militant organisation ETA withering away? Or is it rather an attack on free speech, limiting the choices for voters?

IN A DEMOCRACY, THE BANNING of a political party is never an uncontroversial event, particularly in a country with relatively recent experience of non-democratic rule. The fact that eighty eight percent of Spain's MPs nevertheless decided to request the banning of Batasuna on August 26 reveals the seriousness of the political crisis afflicting the Basque country, and above all the determination of Prime Minister José María Aznar's government to put an end to decades of impunity. Predictably, the measure has been criticised on both legal and political grounds, but events since the banning suggest that the government's decision was not as misguided as some had feared.

The party was born during Spain's transition to democracy following Franco's death in 1975, fighting its first local election in 1979 with a radical left wing, pro-independence programme. Herri Batasuna, as it was then known, never accepted the 1979 Statute of Autonomy

which granted the three Basque provinces of Alava, Guipúzcoa and Vizcaya a significant level of self-government.

This included the recognition of Basque as an official language; a regional parliament with legislative powers; the power to collect and administer taxes; a regional executive with full responsibility for areas such as health, education, culture and television; and its own police force.

In spite of its outright rejection of the Spanish constitution and the political system stemming from it, Batasuna has regularly fielded candidates in local, provincial, regional, national and European elections. In the most recent Basque regional elections, in May last year, it emerged as the fourth largest party, with about ten percent of the vote and seven of the seventy five seats.

The party also contests elections in the neighbouring region of Navarre, which Basque nationalists regard as an integral part of the Basque country. There it won some sixteen percent of the vote in 1999. The party tends to do best in local elections, last held three years ago, where it picked up twenty seven percent of the vote in Guipuzcoa, sixteen percent in Vizcaya and fourteen percent in Alava.

Batasuna and its predecessors have long been identified with Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), and although there

were attempts to prevent it from registering as a political party as early as 1980, the Spanish Supreme Court declared it legal in 1986. A decade later, the entire party leadership was tried and convicted for distributing a video produced by ETA, but their seven-year sentences were revoked by the Constitutional Court two years later. In view of the likelihood of being banned, the party briefly changed its name to Euskal Herritarrok in 1998, renaming itself Batasuna last year.

INVOLVED IN TERROR

If Aznar's government and the major opposition party have finally decided to ban a political organisation with a substantial popular following, it is because they have come to the conclusion that there is now sufficient evidence to prove that Batasuna is neither a political party in the conventional sense, nor even a mere political front for ETA, but rather an integral part of a complex terror network which has a highly sophisticated division of labour.

As far as finance is concerned, Judge Baltasar Garzón has provided evidence of direct transfers between ETA and

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Batasuna. Money raised through extortion – often collected by Batasuna militants – has made its way into party coffers, which have in turn supplied funds to purchase equipment used in terror attacks.

At the organisational level, some one hundred and thirty two elected Batasuna officials have been convicted or are currently standing trial for direct involvement in terrorist activities, such as the provision of safe havens. Similarly, party offices have been used to store explosives and firearms. It is now generally acknowledged that youngsters recruited by Batasuna's youth organisation to become involved in street violence aimed at police, political opponents or mere bystanders, which has resulted in severe injuries and even loss of life, later graduate into ETA proper once they have won their spurs.

At a political level, Batasuna has provided ETA with free election airtime, and acted as its mouthpiece in demonstrations and rallies. The party has never condemned any of the more than eight hundred and thirty killings carried out by ETA. Incredibly, after leaving prison members of ETA convicted for murder have been free to stand as Batasuna candidates at local and regional levels. One of their number, Josu Ternera, represents the party in the Basque parliament's human rights committee, much to the outrage of victims' associations. In short, in recent years Batasuna has acted as ETA's eyes, ears and mouth.

NOT FREE TO SPEAK

Although the government and its socialist allies have consistently argued that they are banning an organisation and its activities, not its ideology, critics have been quick to object that it will be difficult for those in favour of Basque independence to speak their mind freely. According to the latest polls conducted in May by the University of the Basque Country, only three out of ten Basques favour outright independence. This includes not only the vast majority of Batasuna voters, but also a significant forty three percent minority of those who vote for the two largest nationalist parties in the region, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and Eusko Alkartasuna (EA).

The notion that all talk of independence will be banned is patently absurd, since the current Basque coalition government itself consists of parties whose leaders have frequently and openly stated that what distinguishes them from ETA is not its alleged goal, of Basque independence, but merely the means they use in seeking to achieve it.

Critics have also voiced concern that the banning of Batasuna will deprive its voters of a means of expressing their views, leading to frustration and even greater radicalisation. In principle, however, there is no reason why they should not vote for other nationalist parties, as some sixty thousand of them already appear to have done in last year's regional elections. Some may also turn to Ezquer Batua, a left wing party that won five percent of the vote in these elections and later joined the Basque regional government. Alternatively, they could of course form a new party, on the understanding that it too will be banned if it trades in violence.

THREATS AND VIOLENCE

It is more than a little ironic that such concern should be expressed for a party whose leaders and supporters have been busy threatening and hounding non-nationalist elected officials, journalists and academics in an attempt to make them cease their opposition, some of whom have subsequently been murdered by ETA. According to the May poll, carried out before the ban was announced, four out of ten Basques believe that it is impossible to hold truly democratic elections in the region because of the violence against non-nationalist politicians, most of whom need bodyguards to attend their town council, provincial assembly or regional parliament.

Interestingly, according to the same poll, half of Basques describe themselves as non-nationalists, while forty three percent see themselves as Basque nationalists, and seven percent express no opinion. Although they are in the majority, however, many who define themselves as non-nationalists admit they are too scared to publicly voice their political views.

POLARISATION

Doubts have been expressed about the long term consequences of banning Batasuna. If sixty percent of Basques oppose the measure it is probably not so much because they feel it is inherently undemocratic, but because they fear it may lead to increased political polarisation as well as an escalation of violence.

If Batasuna's former voters do indeed decide to support the PNV and EA, which control the Basque regional government, the parties may come under growing pressure to denounce the Statute of Autonomy. The PNV may also feel compelled to renew its initially secret 1998 agreement with ETA, which agreed to a truce in return for the party's promise to break with Spain. It is unlikely, however, that the PNV, which has controlled the Basque regional government since 1980, will throw caution to the wind and risk sacrificing the fruits of office in an irresponsible leap towards an unknown destiny.

Finally, it is unclear what the impact of the ban will be on ETA itself. If the government's diagnosis of the relationship between it and Batasuna is correct, they will find it increasingly difficult to recruit new members, and to gather information and finance. The evidence suggests that these problems have already begun, though nobody expects ETA to disappear overnight.

It is also interesting that Batasuna supporters have not come out in strength in defence of their party, a reaction already evident in 1997 when its entire leadership was imprisoned. There are therefore reasons to believe that Batasuna's bark is worse than its bite, and that in the absence of the relative impunity within which it has operated, its supporters' enthusiasm for ETA may also wane.

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International Events November 2002



NOVEMBER 2

Tamil Tiger rebels scheduled to hold third round of peace talks with Sri Lankan government

NOVEMBER 3

General election in Turkey

NOVEMBER 5

Mid-term elections in US

NOVEMBER 7

Gibraltar government referendum

NOVEMBER 21

NATO Council meets in Prague

NOVEMBER 24

Early general election in Austria

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