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Euskadi

Spanish state steps up repression of radical basque youth

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On March 6th Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon ordered the arrests under the anti-terrorist law of 15 leaders of the Socialist-Independentist Basque youth organisation Haika. They were all charged with belonging to the Basque armed organisation ETA.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/basque1.jpg>] Haika youth "go for it!"

The arrests were carried out throughout Euskadi in a spectacularly co-ordinated operation involving 300 police in which the houses of those arrested and offices of Haika were searched and numerous materials confiscated. Masked police pointed guns to the heads of family members of one of those arrested after breaking into his house at night and used a kind of violence reserved until now for the arrest of armed ETA members, as if to confirm before hand the charges.

The arrests met with an immediate response. Thousands of youth organised demonstrations across villages and towns in Euskadi and in some places erected barricades and burned buses. Aside from protests from the usual organisations of the Basque National Liberation Movement, the arrests have been condemned by the leadership of the moderate Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), the non-nationalist United Left (IU), and left nationalist organisations that oppose ETA's violence like Zutik, Hautsi and Batzarre. IU and PNV both pointed out that the arrests were legally unsound and have clear political motivations intended to strike a blow at the independentist movement and favour the government's candidate in the coming May 13th elections to the Basque Parliament.

After the arrests, 50 Haika members gave a press conference in which spokesperson Asier Tapia asserted that the arrests were: "... part of the complete fascist offensive by the Spanish and French states whose aim is to annihilate Euskal Herria" and assured that "Haika will respond to those responsible for this attack and their collaborators". The following day he too was arrested for "apology of terrorism".

Haika called for a "day of struggle" on Friday with a general strike in universities and schools and demonstrations to protest against the arrests.

Haika and Garzon's charges

Haika is a mass youth organisation created on the 22 April of last year from the fusion of the Spanish-Basque youth organisation Jarrai and the much smaller French-Basque Gazteriak. The new organisation was launched at a political camp organised in France attended by 20,000 youths. According to Haika spokesperson Igor Ortega the new organisation has been growing fast and today counts 4,000 activists. It's the first Basque national political organisation in the sense that it encompasses Basque youth living in both France and Spain thus overcoming the political division of Euskal Herria.

The charge sheet in which Garzon justifies the arrests of the 15 youths is from beginning to end non-sensical. It refers to Haika as a "criminal underground organization" when everyone knows it's an (legally constituted) organisation that carries out all of its activities in public. It states that Haika: "is committed to illicit ends such as the breaking up of the territorial unity of the state and the subversion of the present legal-constitutional order and advocates violence against society to fulfil these ends". Does Garzon mean that advocating independence for Euskadi and the reform of the Spanish constitution to allow for the exercise of the right of self-determination are now illegal in Spain? While it's true that Haika has always said that all forms of struggle for independence are legitimate, it has never explicitly called for the use of violence.

Garzon also claims that Haika is responsible for the direct execution of the Kale Borroka (street struggle), and that it's subordinated to the (armed struggle) ETA-EKIN, ETA-KAS complex. The Spanish authorities have been obsessed for years with the consistent militancy and radicalism of young Basque independentists. It accused Jarrai and now Haika of being nothing more than the recruiting and support ground for ETA and of being behind the Kale Borroka a "training ground" according to Garzon for future ETA activists. [1]

Cotino, the Spanish police officer in charge of the police raid said: "These youths start by throwing stones, then they move on to throwing molotov cocktails and finally end up picking up a gun or placing a car bomb".

The other main accusation launched against Haika is that it's considered the breeding ground of ETA. This accusation is based on the fact that many of the ETA activists captured by the police since the end of the 1998 truce had been at some point in their past members of Jarrai.

On the basis of suspicion, Garzon and the Spanish Ministry of the Interior want to legally criminalize all members of Haika, not because of what they have done, but because of what they could do according to Garzon before it's done. Haika members, as a collective, are being arrested for what they think and believe not because what some of its members actually do or are personally responsible for.

As so many other times before, the anti-Basque nationalist Spanish media and government have trampled on the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty'. The arrests have been surrounded by an intense propaganda campaign that immediately presumed the guilt of those arrested even before they have been produced before court. They then moved on to give extensive speculative reports on how Haika is part of ETA without corroborating these accounts. El Diario 16 had a headline reading "Haika: school of ETA terrorists", similarly El Pais referred to Haika as the "Breeding ground of terrorists".

In a typically ludicrous article in El Pais entitled "Trained to hate" Spanish journalist Calleja for example stated: "The detention of the 15 Haika members is positive because it attacks impunity and takes out of circulation a group of individuals who sooner or later will end up using a gun ...".

The crack down on Haika cannot be understood as an isolated incident but as part of a carefully elaborated campaign against the left nationalist movement that has seen six such operations against legal pro-independence collectives in the past two years. These operations have popularly become known in Euskadi as "Garzonadas" because judge Baltasar Garzon with the full support of the PP government and the Spanish media has been at the head of everyone of them.

"Garzonadas"

Garzon has become popular abroad as a progressive judge fighting for justice and human rights in his attempts to prosecute Pinochet and Argentinean military officers involved in gross human rights violations. However, he's much less well known abroad for his role in repressing legal political Basque organisations.

In 1998 he became the first judge since the Franco dictatorship to close down a legal newspaper: the independentist Basque daily Egin, which was the third most widely read newspaper in Euskadi. Despite been made bankrupt and with many of its leading staff behind bars, Egin was replaced a few months later after an extensive popular fund-raising campaign by the equally successful mass readership daily GARA. Garzon's charge against Egin had been that it supplied coded messages intended to give ETA activist's instructions to act. These charges proved

groundless and Garzon was forced to reverse his verdict on Egin a year later.

Garzon then invented the phantom of ETA-KAS (later renamed ETA-EKIN) "criminal complex". According to him KAS and later EKIN were the political umbrella organisations of ETA through which the armed group directed the activities of practically every major left nationalist organisation in Euskadi.

Having fabricated this new phantom with the aid of a propaganda campaign by the Spanish media, Garzon now made use of it to declare XAKI (an organisation linked to the legal political party Herri Batasuna and intended to popularise the independentist struggle abroad) illegal and arrest its leading members. It accused XAKI of being part of the ETA-KAS complex and of being the "ambassadors of ETA" abroad.

In the case of XAKI, Garzon has recently been reprimanded by the 4th section of the National Court for carrying out legally unsound political arrests. The Court reminded him that in accordance with Spanish law Garzon must prove that those involved had committed a crime on an individual basis and could not maintain a case on the basis of criminalizing a whole legal collective and thus turning all of its members into criminals. The Court also found that none of the activities of XAKI could be considered as collaboration with terrorism. Curiously enough the criminalization of a whole legal collective and of all of its members is exactly what Garzon is trying to do again with Haika. Yet despite the clarity of the law, the Spanish government and media continue to ascribe to themselves the role of supreme judges when they affirm that anyone that belongs to Haika is a criminal.

After XAKI, more arrests followed when Garzon declared EKIN, a public independentist organization working within Euskal Herritarok (EH), illegal. [2]

Leading figures of the Fundacion Zumalabe were also arrested for promoting a text under the title "Piztu Euskal Herria" advocating peaceful civil disobedience to fight for independence. According to Garzon civil disobedience was also part of ETA's official strategy to "destabilise the state and subvert the constitution". Little did he care that those arrested were part of a tendency within EH that advocates civil disobedience as an alternative to armed struggle and have publicly opposed violent forms of struggle. [3]

The same was done with AEK, a popular organisation dedicated to the promotion and teaching of the ancient Basque language. In the case of AEK Garzon was also forced to release those arrested due to the weakness of his claims that it was part of ETA-EKIN.

Then came Pepe Rei, editor of the popular independentist magazine Ardi Beltza (with over 8,000 subscribers) who was arrested for "pointing to the victims of future ETA attacks" because he investigated the collaboration of Spanish journalists with the PP government to manufacture a propaganda campaign aimed at criminalizing the Basque nationalist left.

In these entire operations judge Garzon was always acting on information supplied to him at the right moment by the Ministry of the Interior, reflecting the complicity of Garzon with the conservative Popular Party (PP) government's political interests.

The roots of the Basque conflict

Garzon's and the PP government's objectives are clear and fool no one except those who share their political interests or who have become willingly blinded by a very understandable hatred and disgust with ETA.

Having fabricated the illusion that the "Basque conflict" is not a political one but merely a criminal problem involving a minority of terrorists within the "mafia-terrorist-gang ETA", successive Spanish governments have promised to defeat ETA by police repression. [4] But ETA has carried on killing in the name of independence for 40 years despite thousands of arrests, the dictatorship of Franco, the PSOE and UCD government sponsored death squads in the 1980s, French police collaboration etc. It's thus clear that the government has not been dealing with a small handful of apolitical criminals as it wants us to believe and that police repression as a solution has failed.

While this thesis was put to practice, ETA killed over 800 people, government-police death squads killed dozens, democratic rights and human rights suffered due to the adoption of "exceptional measures to fight terrorism", and thousands of Basque and Spanish families suffered from the loss of loved ones killed by this politically motivated violence. Add to that the dispersion of ETA prisoners to places far away from their relatives and the arrests of thousands of young Basques under the anti-terrorist law. [5]

In order to cover up for the blatant failure of the "police solution" thesis, the PP government has now amended it by saying that to finish off ETA the government has to target its social support base, which supposedly involves the over 200,000 supporters of the Basque nationalist left. Furthermore, it now says that Basque nationalism in general, which over 50% of the Basque electorate supports, is to blame for ETA's continued existence. [There are three Basque nationalist parties, the moderate PNV (Christian Democrat), EA (Social Democrat) and HB (radical left-independentist). The PNV is the largest and oldest and has always held government in Euskadi. The next largest is HB-EH followed by EA.]]

According to the PP, Basque nationalism has implicitly given cover to ETA's violence by defending things like self-determination, political dialogue as a solution to the conflict and the right of Basques to decide for themselves their own future. The objective of the government's crusade is now not only to criminalize legal Basque organisations linked to the nationalist left but to remove the Basque nationalists altogether in the coming Basque May elections from the Basque government. According to the PSOE and PP this needs to be done to guarantee "freedom" and "democracy" for those Basques who are not Basque nationalists.

The PNV nationalists have remained in power in the Basque country since the creation of the autonomous government. The PP now intends to replace them by some sort of pro-Spanish Constitution coalition between themselves and the Socialist Party (PSOE). The PP government has seen how a hard pro-Spanish nationalist and police stance towards the Basque conflict has helped it to win support from the most conservative elements of Spanish society and from those Basques that consider themselves Spaniards. It's running the former Minister of the Interior Jaime Mayor Oreja on the basis of his repressive record as candidate for lehendakari (Basque president), despite having failed abysmally in his promise to wipe out ETA through police operations in a couple of years when he came to office in 1996.

Political solution needed

Academic Ramon Zallo and many others, both nationalist and non-nationalists alike who have consistently condemned ETA's brutality, have argued over the years that the Basque conflict is mainly a political one that needs to be addressed on the basis of its fundamental political causes through non-exclusionary political dialogue. [6]

Its underlying cause is based around the simple fact that a large section of the Basque people are not satisfied with their actual relations with Spain and support the exercise of self-determination. ETA uses this fact as an excuse for its violence, but its existence is merely a manifestation of this deeper political conflict and it will not disappear until the political causes for the conflict are resolved.

Spanish state steps up repression of radical basque youth

The PP government in turn is attempting to use ETA as an excuse to politically wipe out Basque nationalism, which it considers to be its real enemy. The Spanish nationalist PSOE-PP anti-terrorist pact signed this year, which is based around the defence of the Spanish Constitution and opposition to any talk of self-determination or political conflict couldn't have stated it more clearly.

Actions like those taken by Garzon and the PP government against the legal Basque independentist movement only serve to justify ETA's thesis that the Spanish state has placed Euskadi in an exceptional situation in which the only way left for those who struggle for independence is the armed struggle.

The political lynching of Basque nationalism in general by the Spanish media and PP serves ETA's interests equally well, since it confirms its thesis that Spain is interested in wiping out Basque nationalism along with ETA.

The revenge killing by ETA of a Basque autonomous police officer who was a member of the PNV shortly after the raid against Haika also did little to help encourage the mobilisation of popular outrage at the arrests. As so many times in the past just when the potential exists to mobilise large numbers of people against the unjust repressive policies of Madrid, the moral outrage provoked by yet another brutal ETA action only serves to demobilise this support.

Any possibility of creating a lasting peace now will depend solely on the ability of the majority of Basque and Spanish citizens to break away from the mutually reinforcing ETA-PP tandem and assert the need for a just and democratic solution to the conflict. This solution must tackle the political causes that are at the root of the conflict and be based on the dialogue of all those involved, without exclusions. Only in this way will Basques and Spaniards move beyond being used by ETA and the PP as political hostages to advance their interests at the expense of peace and become the main actors in a democratic future in which political violence is finally absent.

[1] The Kale Borroka consists of violent actions committed by radical Basque youths during weekends against police stations, banks and government offices, public buses and other public infrastructure, and offices of Spanish political parties.

[2] EH is the main electoral coalition of Basque independentist forces. It emerged after the 1998 ETA truce from a coalition between Herri Batasuna, Zutik , Batzarre and independents. With over 240,000 votes or 17% of the electorate it has become the third largest electoral force in the autonomous community of the Basque country after PNV and PP and the second in Navarre after UPN-PP.

[3] 50,000 people attended a demonstration in San Sebastian organised by the nationalist left to protest these arrests and defend the legitimacy of civil disobedience as a form of struggle.

[4] The "mafia-terrorist-gang ETA" is how Spanish public TV regularly refers to ETA in a repetitive pathetic attempt to convince the Spanish public that ETA has no political principles and that it's just a mafia style gang formed by a minority of people without ant social support.

[5] Some readers might think it trivial to dwell on the suffering of the families of jailed ETA members whose sons are sent thousands of miles away from their homes making it very difficult for their families to keep in contact; however this suffering is also very real and the majority of Basque society and the Basque parliament take it very seriously and have repeatedly called on the spanish government to relocate the 600 jailed ETA activists to prisons near their homes in Euskadi as the law stipulates they should be.

[6] An example of this is the PSOE mayor of San Sebastian, Odon Elorza, who has recently declared that he supports a referendum and self-determination for the Basque people to resolve what he sees as a political conflict. The PP has called on the PSOE leaders to "discipline" him for this.