

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article620>



Euskadi

Basque rights and Spanish democracy

- IV Online magazine - 2001 - IV334 - October 2001 -

Publication date: Sunday 14 October 2001

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

1. The Basque elections saw a confrontation between two opposed nationalisms: the nationalism of reconquest of the Spanish state and the Basque nationalism of resistance.

This conflict goes back a long way in history but the most immediate antecedents of the current battle relate to the pro-independence Lizarra Agreement in 1998. [1] In this pact, open formulae were put forward for peace, national self-determination, the territorial unity of Euskadi and the political sovereignty of its institutions of self-government; because of this it caused fear among the political classes who uphold the scaffolding of the Spanish state.

The Spanish government presented the Basque elections as a plebiscite between Spain (presented thus as the paradigm of democracy) and Basque nationalism (presented as the paradigm of violence). A plebiscite that it has lost and which has led to an entirely new political situation.

2. The fear of losing a part of the territory of the state has produced a conservative regression throughout the structures of power.

This alarm was activated as always by the powerful neo-Francoist "lobbies" reinstalled under the government of the Popular Party (PP) of Aznar. They exert a decisive influence on the PP and the government; on the judiciary, the police and the army chain of command; on the employers' associations (CEOE); on the media and the Spanish Episcopal conference. All sought the same thing: to reinforce the authority of the state and recuperate Spanish identity among the nationalities of the periphery.

In Euskadi, their opportunity was handed to them on a plate by ETA itself with the breaking of the ceasefire and the political alliances established at Lizarra. For the Spanish right, it was a dream opportunity to make the link between the moral rejection that ETA's killings had provoked in society and the identification between nationalism and violence. This provided a basis to delegitimise the peace initiatives of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) as if the latter were "an immoral attempt to obtain political advantages associated with violent ends".

Thus, with the pretext of "putting an end to the connivance of democratic nationalism with terrorism", the "Spanish reconquest of Euskadi" was launched. Note in passing that the objectives of this new affirmation of Spanish identity against the internal enemy were largely shared by Spanish public opinion. It was about putting Basque autonomy on ice until the conversion of its institutions into an appendix of the central state; reversing the policies of linguistic normalization of Euskera [2] in favour of Castilian; braking the development of Basque national identity, and reducing the Concierto Económico (fiscal sovereignty) to a smokescreen.

The means to do it was to remove the PNV from the Basque government, and the abertzale (pro-independence) left offered the possibility for this with the rupture of the Lizarra Agreement and the abandonment of parliamentary institutions. Democratic nationalism was thus put at the mercy of a hypothetical Spanish-centralist alliance between the Popular Party and the Socialist Party, and ETA contributed to this with its campaign of assassinations of Socialist leaders and municipal councillors.

This pushed the PSOE into the arms of the centralist right, which advocated state repression against the abertzale violence. The "antiterrorist pact" concluded thus between the PP and PSOE was in reality a veritable campaign against Basque nationalism starting from an intense parliamentary blockade, the taking hostage of the Basque institutions and the criminalisation of democratic nationalism, equated with violence, fascism, gulag, holocaust and

xenophobia.

3. The Spanish left has not measured up to the height of the circumstances.

Lizarra was an opportunity for Spanish leftists and democrats, because the possibility of resolving the national problem and democratising the state was posed; but in Spain such citizens (democrats respectful of the rights of others) are a minority overwhelmed by the tidal wave of state nationalism. Thus this minority is all the more courageous.

We can mention the United Left (IU), the Madrid Forum for Dialogue, the nationalist movements of Catalonia and Galicia, the Socialist Party (Maragall), or some independents like Herrero de Miñón. What of the others? Until now, they have fully submitted to the discipline exercised by the Popular Party through the state bodies.

Perhaps it is understandable that the powers that be (monarchy, police and employers' associations) accommodate themselves to the government. We say "perhaps" because it is not very farsighted to refuse prevent the normalization of the life of the nationalities, but at the end of the day one understands this "unity of action" or "communion of interests".

One also understands why the government wished to discipline the Spanish Episcopal Conference to obtain a supplementary moral legitimation, or its quest, or why it has sought through money and sinecures to gain the collaboration of the media. However, it is difficult to forgive those intellectuals who have become apologists of the regime (except Saramago, Vázquez Montalbán and some others), or the Socialist Party's participation in the choir of the right, or the transformation of some unions (CCOO and UGT) into allies of the state against the rights of the nationalities.

4. The election result nonetheless amounts to a defeat for the state and an imponderable victory for Basque nationalism.

The table below leaves no room for doubt. The rate of electoral participation was among the highest registered in a western democracy (80% of registered voters), which gives an idea of the enormous mobilization of citizens in defence of Basque autonomy.

There was very little change in relation to 1998 if one compares the relationship between the "self-determination bloc" (the parties who signed the Lizarra Declaration) and the "Spanish centralist bloc" (PP-PSOE), but this fact is very significant if we consider the very difficult context of the victory of democratic nationalism: the very tough intervention by the state on one hand, and the equally tough campaign of political killings by ETA on the other.

Of interest also are the modifications inside of each bloc. The defeat of the project of the Spanish centralist right which sought to put the Socialist Party in the minority (the relation between these parties remained unchanged) and the spectacular displacement from the abertzale left (Euskal Herritarrok, EH) towards democratic nationalism (PNV).

The political interpretation of these results offers in our opinion a great opportunity to analyse the perspectives for Basque politics.

Party	2001 Vote	%	Seats	1998 Votes	< %	Seats
PNV-EA	604,444	42.72	33	458,967	36.96	27

Basque rights and Spanish democracy

HB-EH	143,139	10.12	7	224,001	17.91	14
IU	78,862	5.58	3	71,064	5.68	2
Total psd*	826,445	58.42	43	754,032	60.55	43
PP-UA	326,933	23.12	19	276,481	21.65	18
PSE-EE	253,195	17.90	13	220,052	17.60	14
Total SC*	580,128	41.02	32	496,533	39.25	32

* psd - pro self-determination parties

* SC - Spanish centralist parties

5. The Spanish centralist alternative to the Basque institutions seems a metaphysical impossibility.

The explanation given by the Spanish government for its defeat was that Basque society was not ripe for the change that it proposed. On this reading, one can conclude that the state will continue its centralist pressure against Euskadi under subtler and less aggressive forms. Nobody doubts it.

On the contrary if we observe the electoral tendencies of the last 25 years, we note that the nationalist majority has been a constant which oscillates between 58% and 60% of the electorate, and this fact authorizes us to suppose that Basque national consciousness is rooted in society to the point of no return and that it is then unthinkable that it can be dislodged from the institutions through the discourse and projects of Spanish national uniformity. To claim the contrary is quite simply a chimera.

6. Democratic nationalism has consolidated its political hegemony.

The PNV won in 96% of municipalities, including the big cities and the concentrations of worker and emigrant populations where socialism has been strongly rooted since the beginning of the 19th century. This concentration of PNV votes is a reaction of national pride against the external aggression of the state.

This aggression against produced a reaction of self-defence, which is at the base of the nationalist hegemony. However, this does not explain why it is so strongly identified with democratic nationalism. To seek an explanation we should refer to the categorical rejection by Basque society of ETA's killings and the complicity of the abertzale left.

7. The setback for the abertzale left is a vote of sanction against ETA by its own base.

Euskal Herritarrok lost 36% of its votes and 50% of its seats. These figures confirm that we were right when we said at the end of the ceasefire that ETA's killing meant the suicide of the Basque left. The 80,000 votes lost by the abertzale left almost all went to the PNV-EA coalition. In fact these are not lost but borrowed votes and they can be won back if the abertzale left decides to undertake a movement of political regeneration by imposing a definitive ceasefire on ETA or breaking with it politically.

The transfer of the political hegemony of the abertzale movement towards bourgeois nationalism is the inevitable consequence of the breaking of the ceasefire. The rupture of the Lizarra Agreement has reversed the course of the political initiative inside the abertzale movement.

Until that moment, the left had the initiative. The internal struggle between the partisans of the status quo (autonomy inside the state) and those of political sovereignty gradually swung the balance in favour of the latter, and the weight of the social left on the desirable content of national construction began to be decisive thanks to the powerful influence of abertzale trade unionism.

New allies were won inside and outside the country and it was only a question of time before a majority of public opinion could be consolidated around the ideas of self-determination. With the backing of this opinion and with a good policy of alliances with the historic nationalities (the Declaration of Barcelona between the Catalan, Basque and Galician nationalists) and the Spanish left (PSOE-IU-trade unions), the door could open to a democratic reform of the state.

It was possible to do all this while the arms remained silent and with a proposal of political articulation for Euskadi taking account of the opinion of each of its territories, as well as of the inequality of the consciousness among them, but ETA's reversion to armed actions has wasted this possibility, to the extent that the new political course is being undertaken under the hegemony of moderate nationalism.

8. The explanations of the electoral defeat given by the leaders of the abertzale left are not convincing.

All that they have managed to say is that the national Table was unable to explain its political alternative and that fear of the Spanish centralist right concentrated the vote around the PNV. They refuse to make a critique of their political strategy and are satisfied with the explanation that the Aralar current contributed to the dispersion of the abertzale vote by criticizing ETA's action.

To excuse its errors by accusing others is unforgivable because it means implicitly renouncing the critical analysis of the causes of the defeat and because this exercise in complacency encloses the abertzale left in a political autism. It blocks the possibility of bringing the abertzale left and Basque politics out of its current impasse.

It is very worrying that the invidious role played by ETA's actions is ignored as if it was a taboo subject. Worrying because it takes no account (or depreciates) the importance of the profound rejection by society and the EH electorate of the unjustified ending of the ceasefire. Worrying that instead of valuing this as the expression of the political maturity of a people, it is depreciated it as if it amounted to political cowardice on the part of the weak and fearful.

Worrying because the fact that the acceptance of ETA's political leadership by the abertzale left is at the base of its grave crisis of credibility is ignored. Worrying that there is no recognition that the breaking of the political engagements entered into at Lizarra and the abandonment of the Basque Parliament, have allowed the PP and PSOE to institutionally and politically obstruct autonomy. Worrying that there is no recognition that EH's electoral campaign was centred uniquely on criticism of the PNV (abusive and injurious recourse to the adjective "unionist" to accuse it, without justification, of abandonment before the state).

The votes lost by EH are thus the fruit of a double rejection: a rejection of ETA's actions and a rejection of the politics of harassment of the PNV. The abertzale left can and must open a profound reflection on these questions and other similar questions, because it is the precondition for the recovery of the credibility lost and the votes lent to democratic nationalism. Otegui is right in saying that the 80,000 votes lost can be recovered even if he did not say that the condition for it was demarcation from ETA's actions.

9. The United Left (IU) faces objective difficulties (of its identity and its nature) in becoming a viable alternative for the abertzale left.

When we speak of IU-EB, we should begin by saying that its message in defence of national rights has been the most radical against the state and the most committed of its history. This commitment has earned it insults and calumnies from the media affiliated to the state but it has allowed it also to win the respect of the left and of democratic nationalism.

The IU-EB constituted a useful vote at these elections because it combined its left orientation with a commitment to support the president of the Basque government against the attacks of centralism.

Despite this, it was not able to win over the critical sector of the abertzale left, and this fact constitutes or should constitute an important factor of analysis when we consider initiatives of recomposition or regeneration of the Basque left. The fact that the loss of votes of the abertzale left was so strong (80,000) and the recuperation of these latter by IU so small (a little over 7,000 votes) has many causes.

Among these multiple causes are: (a) the ideological identification (nationalism) between ETA's critics and the PNV; (b) the strong pressure for a useful vote in favour of democratic nationalism to block the road to the Spanish centralist right; (c) the absence of Basque national roots, or what amounts to the same, the perception of IU-EB as a party of Spanish allegiance, dubious at the level of its Basque identity; (d) the (justified) absence of historic confidence by abertzalism in the Communist Party and its successors in the IU.

There were undoubtedly others but these seem to me sufficient reasons. Thus, despite its positive political evolution, IU cannot be the alternative pole of reference to the crisis of ETA; it is necessary to build this pole in collaboration, starting from inside the Basque left and outside it, jointly with the other lefts.

The necessary regroupment of the now dispersed Basque left demands national frameworks of organization and profiles clearly identified with Basque national construction. We do not say that as a critical observation starting from nothing, but as observation of a fact, which should be the point of departure for political reflection in the IU.

10. The triumph of democratic nationalism legitimates the offers made since the Lizarra Declaration, and this places the problem of national self-determination at the centre of political reality.

These questions are inevitable if we take account of the nature of the Basque problem, the intensity of these demands inside society, the promises made by democratic nationalism (the demand for shared sovereignty of the nationalities in Europe), and the expansion of this same idea in Catalonia and Galicia.

Hence one can also appreciate the recommendations that the Basque employers have just made to the Aznar government: "to relax the policy of autonomy and the model of the state", but even in this case, the resistance of the Spanish state to democratic reform will be too strong to suppose that the victory of nationalism at the ballot box will open the road to self-determination. The right of the Basques to decide freely their national future is posed as an unavoidable problem of political reality, but it is not for all that easy to obtain.

11. The ambivalences of the PNV stem from this difficulty.

Its electoral victory has given it a margin of manoeuvre as broad as the campaign of national aggression that it suffered was intense. But if this margin militates in favour of the "sovereignist wing of the party", there are political

pressures, which are just as important from the two extremes of the chessboard (PP and ETA respectively), which would contribute both to narrowing its margin of manoeuvre and moderating its discourse.

One might anticipate a certain reduction of tensions between political parties, but that does not mean that the centralist pressures of the state on Basque autonomy will disappear. Recall that these pressures are the inevitable consequence of political change inside the structure of the state (conservative reaction of the neo-Francoist type) and that this regime implements them with as much strength as the political alliances between the nationalities of the periphery show weakness.

The opposed pole, ETA, will intervene with all the force of which it is capable. Its objective seems to be still that: "There will be no democratic normalization without dialogue with us"; and dialogue is only acceptable in its eyes on condition that "the territorial unity of Euskadi and the sovereignty of its political institutions is accepted".

While the collaboration of PNV and abertzale trades unionism is necessary, ETA will seek to block by all means the resurrection of the old alliances between the PNV and PSOE and as a consequence will act against the PSOE.

If this is the case, we should expect an escalation of attacks, which will push the PNV towards moderation and anti-terrorist alliances will occupy the privileged terrain that should have been occupied by political alliances for national construction.

This game of multiple pressures will lead to a tension between the political radicalism of the party - represented by Arzallus and Egibar - and the pragmatism of government - represented by Lehandakari. [3] Ibarretxe is the symbol of this, torn between political audacity in the search for peace solutions and conservatism at the level of public management. The difference with the previous period is that the former attempts cannot be repeated because they have all failed. It is not possible to return to the Lizarra Agreement; nor to a police crackdown solution to a problem of a political nature; nor to a new version of the anti-terrorist pact of Ajuria-Enea (recognition of the political character of the problem, but postponement of solutions until after the prior abandonment of violence). Other political formulae are needed starting from the new situation, but the time needed to correct the strong inertias which exist will be longer than envisaged.

12. A new social majority must be rebuilt on the basis of the institutional declaration of the Basque Parliament in favour of national self-determination.

It is possible if we take account of the fact that the three pillars of the governmental programme of the PNV have a social legitimacy broader than that offered by the votes obtained by this party. Peace (the demand for a definitive ceasefire from ETA), dialogue (the search for formulae of democratic consensus) and respect for the free decision of the Basques on all questions of self-government and territorial unity are the elements of a collective sentiment, which transcends the frontiers of democratic nationalism.

Armed with this legitimacy and with the support of Eusko Alkatasuna, the IU and the majority of Basque trades unionism, the PNV can begin to resolve the problem of the internal division of Basque society. We do not envisage a general consensus which brings together all the parties, that is impossible, but a majority consensus which can exert political hegemony without too many somersaults or convulsions.

It is not stupid to think that the political basis for the development of the ideas of national construction and the integration of citizens can be provided by the declaration on the right to national self-determination of the Basque Parliament, elaborated and supported jointly by the PNV and PSOE in the 1990s. This precedent shows it is possible.

13. The second step would be to submit the political proposition, once signed, to a popular referendum.

The plebiscitary method is necessary to avoid what has happened so often with the solemn self-determinist declarations of public institutions. These declarations are only pious wishes if not accompanied by the will to convert them into action proposals and the problem has until now been that nobody in Euskadi has known how to do it.

On the left, we have always had a perspective of unilateral declaration of political sovereignty, according to the model of the proclamation of the Catalan Republic in the 1930s. Indeed, we know that current conditions are no longer those of that period and that the civil disobedience thus implemented is an act of political revolt of a revolutionary type that nobody is prepared for now.

There is an intermediary terrain where it is possible to find a road to resolve the problem we face.

This terrain is the popular referendum that allows us to pass from declaration of intention to action, without this action being an inopportune appeal to national revolt. By this method, we can seek political unity and the mobilization of citizens necessary to bring about democratic reform in Spain.

14. A new Socialist Party leadership is needed to return to the pact with democratic nationalism.

We do not believe that this can be achieved by offering the PSOE a place in government, as was suggested in the ranks of the IU, because that would only be a superficial change of image for this party, which would not affect the deeper problems of its identity. It must review profoundly its national discourse and political alliances, which would demand a collective catharsis and a change of guard.

The problem of the Basque socialists is that they act neither as Socialists nor as Basques. This party should renounce once and for all its anti-democratic idea that only governments of coalition between the PNV as representative of nationalism and themselves as representatives of Spanish centralism can guarantee pluralism and the common life of society.

This theory divides the Basque people into opposed communities and leads the socialists to take up the discourse of Spanish centralism to occupy the niches of power. The PSOE needs leaders who are more sensible to the national problem and the rights of peoples. Leaders who do not have national complexes, and who do not fear the integration of citizens in a political community different from the Spanish one.

The mobilization of citizens in support of initiatives of dialogue such as that initiated by the pacifist collectives, like Elkarri, can also be decisive for the removal of the obstacles to the necessary political turn the Socialists must make.

15. Euskadi is an opportunity for democracy for all the nationalities and for the Spanish left.

On the first point, José Luis Cerián of El Pañ-s said he felt uplifted by the triumph of democratic nationalism in the Basque elections, opening the possibility of a democratic reform of the state rather than its opposite, conservative counter-reform. This should be a call to arms to this left alongside the rights of Basques.

If we pose the problem from our point of view - as Basques - we think also that the Basque country cannot make it alone and that even in the hypothetical case where we obtained a majority of votes supported by a citizens' mobilization, we will not have a relationship of forces sufficient to democratise the Spanish state by ourselves.

Basque rights and Spanish democracy

We need then to build a community of interests shared by the nationalities and the Spanish left to confront the centralist state. Today this alliance necessitates solidarity with Euskadi. Democracy in Spanish society requires respect for the difference of the nationalities and their right to self-determination.

This society must cease its attachment to the imperial idea of a uniform Spain, because this only masks its submission to the power of the centralist state and its despotism towards those whose right of difference is not recognized.

The hour of the Spanish democrats has come. All those who feel themselves uplifted by the defeat of the state in Euskadi now have a good chance to take the open road of the Madrid Forum for Dialogue, the IU and Herreo de MiÃ±on, the Declaration of Barcelona by the Galician, Catalan and Basque nationalists, the Peace conference promised by Elkarrri to build links between the citizens' mobilizations and the solidarity of democrats. Moreover, it is possible.

[1] See IV 320, 321, 325 in 2000 and [331](#) in 2001.

[2] Euskera is the name of the Basque language.

[3] President of the Basque autonomous government.