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Euskadi

The end of ETA

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There are many reasons to suppose that the declaration of a "permanent ceasefire" made on February 22, is the beginning of the end of ETA. The news, which surprised nobody, given the replacement of deadly assaults by others of "low intensity" (there have been no fatal attacks for three years now), responded to the desire to facilitate the mediation work with the socialist government carried out by the Irish priest Alec Reid in close collaboration with the Basque church on both sides of the Pyrenees.

To speak of the beginning of the end of an organization with 50 years of history might appear an excessive affirmation, but not if we analyse the terms of the "ceasefire" and its underlying causes. Among the latter must be considered the effect that the frightful balance sheet of the violence has had on the democratic consciousness of the Basque majority, for the pain it produces strikes with too much strength on the consciousness for it not to be taken into consideration.

In the course of its history, ETA has carried out 72 kidnappings and has caused the death of 817 people (339 civilians and 478 police and military), of whom only 45 correspond to the stage of the Francoist dictatorship. The other 772 were killed under the democratic system. Among the dead civilians, 20 of them were activists or political leaders of the PP and the PSE (12 of them between the years 2000 and 2002). However, to complete the picture of the violence, we should not forget that the Spanish state has killed 145 ETA militant (a good part of them through "state terrorism" under the rubric of the GAL); to this we should add 10 suicides in Spanish jails, thousands of cases of reports of torture; several thousand people jailed or in exile, and a remaining 510 people incarcerated now in Spain as against 150 in French jails.

The sum of these two violences expresses moreover an enormous disproportion between the "small magnitude" of a national problem that can be resolved in a democratic system by democratic methods, and the "great magnitude" of a violence that has become unbearable for a small country of 25,000 square kilometres and three million inhabitants. This explains in part why there is now unanimity of criteria in ETA and between ETA and Batasuna. Also it explains, it should be said in passing, the opinion of Eguiguren (president of the PSE and the key person in the negotiations with ETA), when he says that "the desire for peace and reconciliation is so strong that the wounds of violence will soon heal".

Unlike previous truces, this recent ceasefire declaration has a permanent, that is definitive character. ETA has not announced its disappearance, but it is not hard to figure out that if an armed organization announces that its arms are being silenced in a "permanent" way, what it is saying in reality is that it stops being operative, and from that moment it begins to yield its existence. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the adjective "permanent" is united with that of "unconditional". The ETA declaration does not use this term, but it is most significant that the "ceasefire" is being called without demanding anything of anybody in advance. And this is a decisive change with respect to the previous ones, in that ETA broke off the Algiers negotiations with Felipe González because he did not want to recognise self-determination, and the later truces of the years 1998-2000 broke down because the pact of Estella for sovereignty and self-determination did not accept the content and rhythms ETA wished to impose. Things are otherwise today. ETA has decided to lay down its arms without political concessions in return.

The solution to the problem of the relations between Euskadi and the Spanish state are left in the hands of a round table of political parties with nobody excluded, which is equivalent to recognizing democratic procedures for the solution of the conflict; that is, the renunciation of the subordination of politics to the threat of violence; the demand for no external interference from the Spanish state, and the submission to citizen consultation of the proposal(s) to emerge from the table of parties.

The end of ETA

The announcement of the “ceasefire” is perceived as a liberation. Today the enthusiasm produced by the last truce among the social mass of Basque nationalism does not exist because this truce has been preceded by a weariness of society against an armed organization which truncated the expectations of peace and democracy, assassinating the political leaders of the opposition to “socialise the pain”. Any feeling of relief is thus accompanied by a deep sadness. It is the sadness of knowing that the suffering caused by ETA had no possible justification and has moreover served for nothing. This final “ceasefire” comes late, very late. Before us the enormous task is opened of re-elaborating a new political ethic from which a new left movement can be recomposed to continue the struggle for what is pending; the release of prisoners on both sides of the border, the creation of political institutions that relate the Basque territories to each other, the self-determination and political sovereignty of the Basque territories that demand it. That at least is our wager.