

Euskadi: Between hope and uncertainty

Thursday 19 January 2012, by [EGIREUN Josu](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2012).

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In spite of the catastrophic results of the parliamentary elections in Spain on November 20, 2011 (an absolute majority for the Popular Party) some good news was brought by the vote (333,624) obtained by the nationalist coalition Amaiur (made up of members of the former Batasuna and the parties Eusko Alkartasuna, Aralar and Alternativa) in the Basque Autonomous Community and the Community of Navarre: 14.78% in Navarre, 19.11% in Alava, 19.21% in Biscaye and 34.80% in Guipúzcoa.

It was bad news for the Spanish right which tries by all means to minimise the presence of the coalition inside Parliament (by preventing it from having its own parliamentary group) and marginalising the Basque conflict: there was no reference in Prime Minister Rajoy's inauguration speech to the new phase opened with ETA's definitive ceasefire. And it also bad news for all the constitutionalist parties (including the Socialist Party) who are once again confronted with the obligation of resuming the debate on the model of state and constitution. This debate is known under the formula: "opening the second transition".

The second transition

During the referendum on the Spanish state's constitution in 1978, the draft constitution only obtained a third of the vote in the Basque country. The approval of the Status of Autonomy of the Basque country only obtained 53.96% of the Basque vote, a weak score which historically has left open the resolution of the national problem in the Basque Country.

The electoral success of Amaiur during the recent parliamentary election, like that of Bildu (Amaiur without Aralar) on May 22, 2011 in the elections for the municipal councils and provincial councils (one of the main institutions of the Basque Country Autonomous a Community, responsible for collecting direct and indirect taxes and thus defining tax policy) shows clearly that the transition is not finished in the Spanish state. They put on the agenda the necessity of starting a second transition to resolve the national problem, among others.

Even if, in certain milieus, it is usual to attribute this success to ETA's decision to declare a ceasefire, the exact opposite could be argued: ETA should have stopped because for a long time, above all after 1998, its military strategy had become, in the southern Basque Country, an obstacle to the expression of a vast social sector - very much broader than the social base of the nationalist left alone - which demands the right of the Basque people to decide its destiny.

The origin of the present situation is explained by the exhaustion of the Status of Autonomy which had been supported in 1979 by all the political and trade union forces, except the radical nationalists

and the revolutionary left. After the "Tejerazo" - the failed coup of February 23, 1981 - there had been a process of regression which emptied the status of its advanced content for the Basque Country, to the point where even the PNV (bourgeois nationalist party) and ELA (the majority Basque trade union) began to demand clearly the recognition of the Basque people as political subject.

This shift in position led to the "Lizarra-Garazi agreement" on the right to self-determination of the Basque Country and to ETA's 14 month truce. The Basque country would then know an exceptional period of mobilisation and initiatives with, as corollary, during the elections of October 25th, 1998, a strong electoral polarisation between the political forces of Lizarra-Garazi (60.74%) and the Spanish centralist forces (39.26%), or the best score ever attained by the nationalist left: 224,000 votes.

The breaking of the truce by ETA, 14 months later (December 2, 1999), put an end to this dynamic and the Basque coalition government (PNV, EA and IU/EB) announced in 2001 the elaboration of a new Political Status (which envisaged a future Basque state "freely associated" with Spain, with its own separate legal system and representation inside the European Union) based on three pillars:

- The recognition of the Basque people (the seven provinces of the North and South) as a people with a specific identity in Europe
- Its right to decide its future
- Respect for the decisions of the population of each community (Basque Country Autonomous Community, Navarre and North Euskadi) on the future project.

This initiative takes place within a broader statutory reform in the Spanish state in a context where the dissatisfaction of the Basques as to the functioning of democracy in Spain was very strong: 79% dissatisfied among nationalists and 53% among non nationalists. The viewpoints concerning the Basque question were 30% in favour of independence, 32% for autonomy and 35% for federalism. Only 1% were favourable to centralism.

This proposed status was rejected by the Spanish parliament in January 2005, with the PP, PSOE, Coalición Canaria, IU and Chunta d'Aragon voting against. From then onwards the Basque political situation was blocked, caught between the centralist constitutionalism of the PSOE-PP and ETA's armed activity which had become an obstacle for the nationalist left itself.

Turn of the nationalist left

In 2009, conscious of the risks - delegitimation and political marginalisation - and the traps of this situation of blockage, the political party and the galaxy of the nationalist left decided to start a political debated to put an end to the military strategy and orient towards an exclusively political and democratic strategy. The objective was to recover legalisation, even if that meant openly condemning ETA's activity. 2010 thus marked the shift, internally, of the nationalist left, from the hegemony of the military leadership to that of the political leadership.

But despite this condemnation, the nationalist left did not obtain legal status since ETA continued to exist. To overcome the difficulties and participate in the elections of May 22, 2011, it decided, after a strategic agreement with EA (Eusko Alkartasuna), to set up the electoral coalition Bildu. A necessary choice, because these elections proved essential both from the viewpoint of the objective of recovering institutional representation and to show to ETA that the political road is more useful than the armed struggle.

The excellent result obtained at this election gave a strong legitimacy to the option of the political leadership and lifted the difficulties in advancing towards a declaration as envisaged by the Guernica Agreement, or a "permanent, unilateral ceasefire verifiable by the international community as the expression of the will to definitively halt its military activity". This declaration was supported by a broad spectrum of social, trade union and political actors in the Basque Country. But this agreement was not signed by the PNV or the ELA trade union which had previously signed the Lizarra-Garazi Declaration.

Nonetheless, all these movements and even the definitive halt by ETA did not revive the social dynamic we had known in 1998.

Time of hope, time of uncertainty

Despite the firm position of the PP and the new Spanish government, nobody can turn their back on the new situation: neither to ETA'S definitive ceasefire or still less to the results for the Amaiur coalition at the elections. But the Rajoy government will try to control the political timing, to lead a war of attrition against the nationalist left and the Basque popular movement whether on the peace process - legalisation of the left nationalist "Sortu" party, political prisoners, reconciliation, and compensation to victims and so on - as on the basic political problem.

This basic problem is brought out in the 4th point of the Aiete Declaration elaborated by Kofi Annan, Gerry Adams, Bertie Ahern, Jonathan Powell, Pierre Joxe and Gro Harlem Brundtland: "the non violent actors and the political representatives should meet and debate together the political questions (...) and consult the citizens. That is would allow arriving at a situation without conflict."

These are the two questions on which it would be necessary to develop political initiatives and mobilisations to shift the position of the Spanish and French governments.

But if ETA's definitive ceasefire and the result of the nationalist left open the way to a hope to advance in the resolution of the Basque conflict the uncertainties are still there.

First an element which proves the degradation of the relationship of forces is the non-resignation of the Basque government: it was set up profiting from the exclusion of the nationalist left; indeed the last two elections show to what point this government is illegitimate, but also to what point the sole force of the electoral results is not enough to bring it down.

Then, because of the agenda that the nationalist left gives itself: an agenda self centred on the national question, where the social question occupies a subordinate place. One patent sign: the tensions between the ELA union and the left nationalist union LAB. Working in stable alliance since the outbreak of the economic and social crisis - three general strikes in the Basque Country since 2009 - their relations have deteriorated. Notably because of the criticisms of ELA - whereas LAB remains silent - in relation to the policies of the Bildu coalition which manages the General Council of Guipúzcoa and several municipalities. According to ELA, the agreement signed by Bildu for the merger of the three Basque saving banks leads to their privatisation.

This situation could get worse since Bildu has just reached a budgetary agreement with the bourgeois PNV party and another tax agreement with the Socialists, both within the framework of neoliberal policies.

It could also worsen because, in the context of the Spanish parliament, the position of Amaiur - according to what has been said in the press and according to their document drawing a balance

sheet of the elections - is to participate only in questions relating to the Basque Country. A position difficult to understand. Thus they abstained - and have not then voted against! - during the election of Rajoy. A sort of: "it isn't for the Basques to get involved in the election of the Spanish government"...

Numerous uncertainties weigh then on the future. The resolution of the Basque conflict demands the construction of links with the working class, the popular classes and the social and political anti-neoliberal left of the rest of Spain, this left which votes against Rajoy.

And when we know that the Basque nationalist left brings together the most significant and active sector of the activists mobilising against the crisis. on the ecological questions or against the oppression of women there is a risk of a weakening of this activist force to the benefit of a delegation of responsibilities to the institutions.

For now, it is urgent to advance on the questions of the prisoners and victims. But beyond that to resolve the Basque question, it is indispensable to work towards the reconstruction of an anti-capitalist and nationalist left. An anti-capitalist left which takes up the national question as an element in the emancipation of the peoples.

In conclusion - even if this point goes beyond the limits of this article - I wish to note that anti-capitalists should pay attention to the national questions, including their "French" aspect. The experience of Southern Euskadi shows that, for an anti-capitalist party, it is not only about limiting oneself to demanding the right to self determination and democratic rights, outside of the "abertzale" galaxy. It is necessary to get involved in the social and political processes of construction of the identity of the Basque people: the defence of language, of culture, of territorial recognition (Basque department), thinking of the Basque people as a political subject across frontiers.

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P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>