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Opinion Piece - Electoral Politics and ETA's ceasefire

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The recent Euskadi ta Alkartasuna (ETA) ceasefire declaration has been received with much interest and fanfare by the international media. The same announcement was met instead with a tangible lack of enthusiasm by Spanish and Basque political figures. The Spanish president Zapatero, the Basque president Lopez and Urkullu, the leader of the most voted Basque nationalist party (PNV), agreed that the communiqué was a 'step forward' but ultimately 'insufficient' and 'not the news the country had been hoping for'. Such mix of scepticism and disappointment is partly a product of the previous failed experience with the 2006 ETA truce. Months of painstakingly slow negotiations between ETA and government representatives were then shattered with a bomb attack at Madrid airport that killed two people. The outcome left the Zapatero's government frustrated and unwilling to get their fingers burnt again.

Yet there are in fact a few interesting divergences from the 2006 ceasefire. The use of words 'general' and 'verifiable by the international community' are new and help to separate this statement from the 2006 declaration, which was also 'permanent'. The latter has already been rejected by the Spanish Deputy Prime Minister Rubalcaba: Spain will not accept the involvement of international mediators and any hypothetical disarmament process would be verified by the Spanish security forces. The former is more relevant in practice as it would involve the termination of 'kale borroka' (street fighting) activities and the extortion of Basque businessmen under the so-called 'revolutionary tax'. There is an additional novelty: a commitment for a 'lasting resolution towards an end to the armed confrontation'. This phrase has never been used by ETA before but it comes with the *caveat* that the dissolution of the group should follow the fulfilment of political conditions such as territoriality and self-determination.

So it is not quite a familiar case of 'more of the same' and the government's response may be viewed by some, not least by Gerry Adams, as a missed opportunity 'for a lasting peace and a new beginning in the relationship between the Basque people and the Spanish state'. At the same time, it is not hard to understand this response if we examine the current security and political



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context. There is a clear strategic logic behind the Spanish government decision: from their point of view, the current approach is working. ETA is terminally ill, having been hit hard by not only hundreds of arrests in recent years product of close French-Spanish cooperation but also the impact of the judicial investigations that since the late 1990s have dismantled their intricate support network. The general view within the socialist party and the state's judicial and police authorities is that they have the upper hand and there is little need for a change in tactics. Proof that the pressure has not wavered comes from the recent arrests of two alleged ETA members in France and, in a separate operation, 10 members of EKIN, ETA's political apparatus.

However a much less talked about motive for the government's reaction is rather more pedestrian: electoral politics. Opening negotiations again is seen as a politically very risky move in a context where the economic crisis is rapidly eroding the party's support amongst the Spanish electorate. The socialists are not willing to lose ground on this matter and will attempt to out-toughen the opposition and play hard-ball with ETA's demands.

Importantly, electoral politics not only helps us to contextualise the Government's response, they are also crucial to understand ETA's decision to announce a ceasefire on the first place. It is clear by now that ETA is militarily very weak, totally incapable to bring the independence of the Basque region by force of arms alone. A November 2010 poll by Basque Country University puts the backing of ETA's violent methods down to about 3% of the Basques. Incidentally, support for independence comes to 28% of the population. Whereas ETA's young ranks continue with their enthusiastic advocacy of violent action, the older generations have grown disenchanted and dissension within imprisoned members means that the numbers of those supportive of a political solution within the group are growing. The future prospects look bleak for the terrorist organisation.

On the other hand, the main source of pressure for the 2011 declaration has not come internally but from Batasuna, the group's political wing. The explanation again comes from political calculations: banned since 2003 following a court ruling that provided evidence of operational support to ETA, Batasuna leaders have grown concerned of losing ground to other pro-independence Basque political parties. After losing a third of their support, the fear is that these legal parties that work within the institutions and oppose ETA violence would continue attracting



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the votes of their traditional electorate while they stand in the wilderness outside the normal political process. Eusko Alkartasuna (EA) would benefit much from the continuation of the present situation: a party that has participated in several Basque regional governments in coalition with PNV, it supports similar economic policies and political goals. Alternatiba and Aralar, a scion of the old Batasuna, are other potential beneficiaries. Trapped and increasingly irrelevant, Batasuna needs to return to the institutions in the next elections and they can only do so by renouncing their support for violence and severing their operational links with ETA. A legalised Batasuna could then establish a united pro-independence left-wing political front with EA and Alternatiba and regain their footing in Basque politics. The imprisoned leadership's strategy is backed now by a majority of the Batasuna base and it is obvious that an inactive ETA would greatly assist in the process.

In sum, the banning of Batasuna has eventually encouraged their leaders to put pressure on ETA for a ceasefire that would facilitate their legalisation and subsequent participation in the next local and regional elections. Attention will be shifted then to whether the Spanish judicature rules the new name, lists and rules compliant with the Ley de Partidos. If so, this would help to validate their strategy and encourage Batasuna's leadership to impose their views on ETA's leadership for the very first time. If Batasuna's proxy is rejected –as with other previous attempts- there will be a renewed internal debate: will this strengthen the desire of Batasuna's top-ranks for a non-violent path to the independence of Basque country? Or will this give arguments to the more hardcore elements in ETA and the dissenting minority within the party that a return to terrorism is necessary?
