

CANADA

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# Spain may be heading for democratic socialist government

By Robin Smyth  
in Bilbao

EVEN IN a town where passions run high, Lieutenant-Colonel Sergio Borrajo walked home to lunch each day without any feeling he was taking his life in his hands.

The retired 68-year-old colonel was provincial director of the Association of Wounded War Veterans in Vitoria, a town at the heart of the Basque struggle for independence. He had received no threats from ETA Terrorists, and he is said to have displayed to strong political opinions.

Yet at lunchtime recently a young man, waiting by the glass doors in the hallway of the colonel's apartment block, fired a bullet through the back of his head as he stepped into the lift. He was the twenty-second victim of terrorism in Spain in the first seven weeks of this year, and within 48 hours there was a twenty-third — a member of the Civil Guard, shot down in a Madrid street.

The slaughter, which at this rate could make 1979's murder total twice as bad as the grim record set last year, did not help the political parties to fix the country's attention on the first election campaign under the new Constitution.

Felipe Gonzalez, the Socialist leader, is forecasting that the March 1 poll will see the birth of a socialist Spain. Adolfo Suarez, the Prime Minister, told his election meetings in Galicia last week that his UCD (Union of the Democratic Centre) was well on the way to winning the overall majority in the Cortes: it now lacks.

Poll soundings indicate that, despite full coverage of the election campaign in the newspapers and on television, the biggest party in the country is still the floating voters.

Whether the victory goes to Suarez or Gonzalez — or, as the other parties warn, a deadlock forces them into coalition with each other — the Basque problem is waiting to challenge the winner. The question facing the parties is whether they are prepared to negotiate with the terrorists of ETA-Militar, and if not, what other ways can be found of stopping the relentless murders of Army officers and policemen.

The Government's answer is a refusal to treat with killers. 'Either the State will get the better of ETA,' says Martin Villa, Minister of the Interior, 'or ETA will get the better of the State.'

In this the Government is supported by the Communists. Robert Lerchundi, Secretary-General of the Basque Communist Party, who once belonged to ETA and was arrested six times by Franco's police, compares the ETA — Militar terrorists to the Sicilian Mafia and dismisses their methods of wringing 'revolutionary taxes' from Basque businessmen as 'pure extortion'.

The Communist Party has only a small following in the Basque country, but it is expected to improve its position on March 1. The Communist following is almost exclusively among the 'new Basques' — the immigrant workers from less fortunate parts of Spain, drawn by a prosperity now waning fast.

The immigrants make up 30 per cent of the Basque population, and their children account for another 11 per cent. Many of them feel a growing hostility to the regional, patriotism of 'Euzkadi', the homeland of the Basques.

'If there is not agreement and

mutual tolerance between the two sections of the community, there is a real danger that the population will polarise along these lines,' says Jose Maria 'Txiki' Benegas, the Socialist Councillor for Internal Affairs in the Basque General Council — the Government's tentative first concession towards regional autonomy.

Txiki Benegas, one of the most lively and most quoted of the rising generation of Basque politicians, believes a truly independent government along socialist lines is needed in the Basque country to prevent the 'Ulsterisation' of the crisis through a widening rift between the two ethnic groups.

## Divided

The Socialists appear divided over the desirability of an eventual negotiation with ETA, but they are not ruling out the possibility. Benegas, who rejects Martin Villa's adamant refusal to consider talks, admits the Socialists have so far been no more successful than the Government in tentative approaches to the terrorists. The overtures break down ETA's insistence that all negotiations must be public.

The terrorist movement has been hard-hit by France's reluctant decision to round up suspected activists, who have hitherto operated from safe bases north of the Pyrennees. Many Basques believe the real infrastructure of the movement lies underground in Spain and that the French clampdown will drive harmless or neutralized exiles into active terrorism.

Only a small fraction of the population of the four Basque provinces is openly in favour of violence. But many more have so yearned for national heroes

under the oppression of fascism, when the two most intensely Basque regions — Vivcaya and Guipuzcoa — were branded 'the traitor provinces', that they find ways of overlooking the murders.

The March 1 election, and to an even greater extent the municipal elections in early April, will give the first clear picture of how strong ETA support really is. ETA-Militar sympathizers have a federation in the field called 'Herri Batasuna', whose electoral shock tactics include sit-ins in public buildings. ETA-Politico-Militar, the less violent wing of the movement, is re-resented by another political federation, 'Ezkadiko Ezkerra'.

The party expected to dominate both elections in the Basque provinces is the 84-year-old Christian Democrat PNV, the Basque Nationalist Party. In 1977, the PNV and the Socialists together cornered more than 50 per cent of the poll. What all the parties expect Herri Batasuna are agreed upon in theory is the draft Statute of Autonomy for the region, signed at the end of last year. The Statute would give the Basque their own locally recruited police force and control of education, culture, language and local taxes.

In the past, the Government has been afraid that, if it grants this large measure of autonomy, it will face a right-wing military coup in defence of Spanish unity.

A new development tending to have a sobering effect on everyone's calculation is the fast decline of the Basque economy. Spain's industrial promised land is on the way to becoming its most acutely distressed area, so the Government has an added incentive to take the urgency out of the Basque crisis before it is complicated by social unrest.