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Decentralizing Spain

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Power to the Provinces, To a Point

By EDWARD SCHUMACHER

THURANGO, Spain — The rumor spread that the central Government was planning to close a television station here begun by the regional Basque government without Madrid's permission. Five vans of Basque police officers were immediately called to the station.

Soon two carloads of national Civil Guards arrived and demanded entry, saying there had been a bomb threat. The local police balked, and in the ensuing showdown the Civil Guard was forced to retreat.

"I don't know what the Guard's real intention was," said José María Gorordo, the station director, "but there was no bomb."

The incident two weeks ago was one more skirmish between Madrid and its regional governments over local autonomy. While terrorism practiced in support of Basque independence dominates the news, wrangling over such issues as locally run television stations more fundamentally shapes Spanish politics.

On a continent where centralism rules, Spain has become Europe's most decentralized nation. Its democratic Constitution of 1978 divided the country into 17 regional governments, or "autonomies." Many areas did not have much regional identity before, but in just eight years they have set up governments and taken over such local concerns as schools, hospitals and police. Dying old languages such as Basque have been revived.

But the transfer of power has not always been smooth. The cost of the regional governments, which receive much of their funding from Madrid, has soared. Many local officials accuse the Administration of Prime Minister Felipe González of slowing decentralization by withholding money and real decision-making power.

The Basque television dispute was typical of the problems that have arisen. The tension began two months ago when the Basque government added to its Basque channel a second one for broadcasts in Spanish. The new channel was designed to reach the two-thirds of the area's two million people who do not speak Basque. It competes with state-run national television, and the González Government filed suit to close it. When the suit was dismissed, rumors of a forcible closure began.

The Basque case is particularly sensitive because frustration over autonomy is used by the terrorist group E.T.A. (the Basque abbreviation for Basque Homeland and Liberty) to justify violence and press for independence. The group is at the center of one of the most pressing Basque autonomy issues. The regional government wants its own police to replace much of Spain's Civil Guard and National Police in the fight against E.T.A. The Civil Guard in particular is resented in the area for having ruthlessly enforced a crackdown on Basque regionalism by Francisco Franco, the late dictator.

E.T.A. itself has called for the withdrawal of national security forces as a condition for an end to the fighting; its members are known to fear reprisals if they lay down their arms. The González Government, however, rejects the proposed withdrawal, partly because it would make more difficult the coordination of the national fight against E.T.A., and partly because the Government does not trust even more moderate Basques.

"They think we want autonomy as a means to get independence," said Juan María Bandres, head of the pacifist Basque Left Party. "They're wrong."

Explained Xabier Arzallus, head of the Basque Nationalists, the governing regional party: "If we could be independent, we would, because we are up to our noses with Madrid. But independence isn't practical, so what we fundamentally want is more autonomy at a political level. Not independence. Autonomy."



The New York Times/Edward Schumacher
Director of Basque Television in the station's studio.

Basque Vote Set After Schism

1986

Special to The New York Times

MADRID, Sept. 26 — The Basque regional government today called early elections amid political turmoil that officials in Madrid said had complicated the fight against Basque separatist terrorists.

The elections, called for Nov. 30, have been caused by a schism in the governing Basque Nationalist Party that the head of the regional government, José Antonio Arzanza, said in an address on Basque radio and television had made the region un governable.

On Thursday, 11 of the party's 32 deputies in the regional Parliament officially formed a separate party, called, almost identically to the first, the Basque Nationalists.

Though they oppose terrorism, leaders from the two sides have already begun to make campaign statements

as to which is the more nationalist, leading the separatist cause that the terrorist group E.T.A. says it champions. Thirty-two people have been killed in E.T.A. attacks this year.

For nearly a century, the Basque Nationalist Party, a center-right group historically allied with the Roman Catholic Church, has been the dominant political force in the Basque region. It has stood for self-determination, but under Spain's new democracy, the party has accepted that independence, while desirable, is unrealistic.

Behind the schism is a personal clash between the party's two most powerful leaders, Xabier Arzanza, a former Jesuit priest, and Carlos Garaikoetxea, a former head of the regional government. Mr. Arzanza has largely run the party from the inside, but Mr. Garaikoetxea is charismatic with voters.