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Spain's 'coffee for all' can be a bitter brew

By Victor Mallet in Madrid

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Galician nationalists have lost power in Galicia. Basque nationalists have lost power in the Basque country. At first glance, the results of the two Spanish regional elections in March suggest that ethnic nationalism on the Iberian peninsula is in retreat.

Spain is not unique as a fragile nation state with centrifugal communities on its fringes: the closest comparison is probably with Britain, where Scotland looks far more likely to secede from the union than the Basque country or Catalonia do from Spain.

But the legacy of the civil war in the 1930s means that nationalism is a particularly sensitive issue today for the inhabitants of Spain, whether they call themselves Spaniards, Castilians, Catalans or Cantabrians.

After Francisco Franco, the civil war victor, died in 1975, Spain celebrated the end of his dictatorship - and its harsh suppression of diverse languages and cultures - with a liberal constitution enshrining regional autonomy within a united Spain.

The obvious beneficiaries were the Basques, Galicians and Catalans but, since it was unfair to exclude Andalucians, Valencians or anyone else, the policy adopted was *café para todos* : coffee for all - and so modern Spain consists of 17 autonomous communities and two enclaves in north Africa.

Support for full independence is mostly confined to the Basque country, where Eta militants pursue a campaign of terror against the Spanish state and those deemed to have collaborated with it.

But many non-Castilians do favour more autonomy and speak vaguely of having their region recognised as part of the European Union rather than of Spain. Autonomy is credited with reviving neglected cultures. Catalonia, brimming with confidence, has established delegations - shadow embassies - in cities such as London and Brussels.

Yet many Spaniards, including those who voted for the unionist parties that won the latest regional elections, say the pendulum has now swung too far in the direction of autonomy.

There is a whiff of centrist counter-revolution in the air, a sense Spain will fall apart if Madrid is too lenient with the regions. That is one reason for the scant criticism at home of Spain's divergence from most European partners in refusing to recognise the independence of Kosovo.

Language policy has been especially contentious, with moves by regional governments to impose Catalan, Galician or Basque in schools and the civil service provoking angry reactions from Spanish-speaking residents. Dozens of doctors in Ibiza, for example, have threatened to leave the island because of the Balearic regional government's insistence that they be tested in Catalan, the local language.

Forced marches towards linguistic divergence have gathered pace in a manner that intrigues philologists but is regarded as artificial and politically dangerous by Spanish nationalists. Catalan speakers, ironically, can be very protective of their own language while simultaneously mocking the pretensions of Valenciano and Mallorquí, the Catalan dialects of Valencia and Mallorca, to an independent existence.

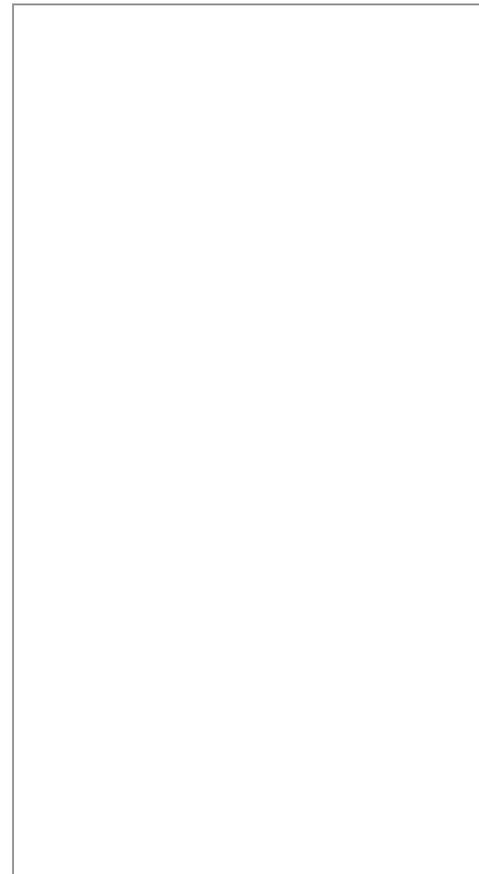
Charles de Gaulle, to illustrate the difficulty of running a diverse nation, famously referred to the hundreds of different cheeses produced in France. But neither he nor his successors would have tolerated the number of languages and dialects officially promoted in Spain today - let alone accepted the need for simultaneous interpreters for TV news coverage on election night.

Autonomy is not only occasionally inconvenient for those who want to speak Spanish. Investors, domestic and foreign, complain bitterly about the extra bureaucracy imposed by regional governments, costs Spain can ill afford as it plunges into the deepest recession in memory. "The administration in Spain suffers from elephantiasis," was the verdict of one unionist lawyer in Madrid recently.

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the Socialist prime minister, is in a trap set by Spain's democratic constitution for governments without an absolute majority in parliament. He senses the worries of voters ahead of the European elections in June and his instincts are to promote Spanish unity. But he needs the votes of regional parties in order to stay in control of Spain.

Unfortunately for Mr Zapatero, every regional government from Galicia to Murcia is determined to hang on to the powers it gained after Franco's death. *Café para todos* is a stimulating brew no one wants to forgo. When the waiter comes, however, no one wants to pay the bill.

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