

► are true—may have had links with the domestic intelligence agencies, snooping on neighbours and colleagues.

The probable explanation is that the left-leaning governments have included many former communist ministers or party officials—recipients, not writers, of the spooks' reports—plus a few ex-dissidents, likelier victims (by and large) than agents of the secret police. But among conservative ministers, a fair number in communist days were middle-ranking public servants; the sort of people whose help the spooks would hope to recruit.

The conservatives' response has not helped them. Their members on Mr Mec's committee have walked out, talking of procedural irregularities. When the data-protection ombudsman ruled that no one should have data about him revealed without his consent, current ministers and those of the leftist government of 1994-98 rushed to give it. Ex-members of the conservative one of 1990-94 or Mr Orban's of 1998-2002 were slower.

Opinion polls suggest that Fidesz and the right have been hurt. Voters already knew that Mr Medgyessy was on the ruling party's central committee in communism's later days. But Mr Orban had portrayed his team as firmly anti-communist. To many, that now smells of hypocrisy. ■

Terrorism in Spain

Shutters down on ETA's friends

The government takes the first steps to an on the terrorists' political arm

WHEN a bomb set off by your terrorist friends kills a child, it will not do just to talk of "tragic circumstances" and say that, while you "will not justify" the killing, you will graciously "analyse" why it happened. That is what Batasuna, the political arm of the Basque-separatist terror group, ETA, did last week after an explosion that killed a man and a six-year-old girl in a police barracks at a resort on the south-east coast. One week and another, mercifully victimless, resort explosion later, Batasuna learned the cost: the People's Party government, backed by the opposition Socialists and most public opinion, plans to recall parliament to start the process of getting Batasuna banned.

Under a new law passed for just this purpose, that means a parliamentary motion, which will then go to the Supreme Court for a ruling. With over 300 of the 350 seats, the two big parties face no problem getting the motion through. Even so, both are working to get wider support: from the far left, sundry regional "nationalists" and



There was also a six-year-old in there

even the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), which, though non-violent itself, is often accused of being the mild half of a soft-man, hard-man Basque-separatist duo.

The PNV-led government of the autonomous Basque region has long demanded that Madrid devolve to it the remaining functions—37 of them, it says—that it is entitled to but which are yet to be transferred. If not, and soon, it said earlier this year, it would take over these powers anyway. That was pure theatre. Now the centre says it will reopen talks about that—but expects PNV members in the central parliament to vote against Batasuna.

This too is political theatre, but it has a sharper edge. Batasuna has no reputation to lose, except among its own enthusiasts (though it managed to get 10,000 of them on to the streets of San Sebastian on Sunday, in protest against any ban). But the People's Party is eager to discredit the PNV as well. So ask its support for a ban, and its predictable refusal would have that effect. Which is, in fact, just what has happened.

It is less clear that banning Batasuna will help defeat ETA. Spain's prisons already hold some 500 proven or alleged ETA men (women, in fact, one in eight of them) or their active supporters. Regularly over the years some pro-ETA group or another gets jumped on. Yet, for all its murders, ETA still has supporters, and the threat of the San Sebastian demonstrators, "if you want war, you can have it", is not to be taken lightly. A ban on their politics may push some into taking up guns instead. Even some firm supporters of a ban, like Spain's leading newspaper, *El País*, admit it could have unwelcome side-effects.

Few Spaniards have doubts, however. As huge protest marches have repeatedly shown, decent people are fed up to the back teeth with what *El País* rightly calls ETA's strategy of "blackmail and terror". ■

Terrorism in Greece

Better late...

ATHENS

Arrests of N17 members do not explain why it was immune for so long. Politics?

FEW Greeks feel the need for a thriller on the beach this summer. Pick up a newspaper or turn on the radio for the next instalment of real-time drama: the arrest—after 27 years when not one was caught—of members of November 17, a terrorist gang blamed for 23 murders and dozens of bomb and rocket attacks in that time.

Since the first arrest on June 29th, the police have pulled in 15 alleged N17 members, including French-educated Alexandros Yotopoulos, its suspected leader, nabbed at his villa on an Aegean island. Raids on hide-outs have turned up arms and explosives, and diskettes detailing N17 bank accounts and plans for future targets—among them NATO convoys to Kosovo from Salonika, and facilities being built in Athens for the 2004 Olympics.

Costas Simitis, the Socialist prime minister, is relieved: concern had mounted over security for the Olympics. He even had a pat on the back from George Bush, who called the arrests an "important contribution" to the war on terror. And Mr Simitis's Pasok party, lagging the centre-right New Democracy party as local elections approach, has seen its ratings rise.

Both parties are pushing the line that N17's members are more common criminals than terrorists. This ignores the nature of N17's victims (the first, in 1975, was the local CIA station chief), the long-winded ideological declarations it used to send to a leading newspaper after its attacks and the alleged role of Mr Yotopoulos. But with a general election expected late next year, the pretence suits both. Trials of N17 members are likely to start early next year and will last for months. Pasok, which used to have a Marxist charter, wants to distance itself from any reminder of its old beliefs; New Democracy wants no noisy left-right confrontation that might upset its chances of winning the election on the good old ideology of "throw the rascals out".

Awkward questions remain. For the chattering classes, who rubbed shoulders with Mr Yotopoulos—under an alias—at fashionable cafés and gallery openings in Athens, the puzzle is how he avoided detection for over 20 years. Mere police incompetence, or high-placed political friends? N17's supposed head of operations, one Dimitris Koufodinas, is still at large. And the group has now promised fresh attacks. "Ridiculous," declared Michalis Chrysohoidis, the public-order minister. Time will show. ■