

The future of Catalonia

Of bulls and ballots

BARCELONA

Catalonia is set to have a big role in Spain's politics

THE glorious, if gory, sight of a Spanish fighting bull charging at a cape-waving man in a sequined suit may soon disappear from Catalonia. In a decision as much about Catalan identity as about animal rights, deputies in the local parliament agreed in December to take up a petition to ban bullfighting. It looks set to come into law during the 2010 season.

The ban is about much more than friendliness to bulls, though it is part of a political game that resembles a bullfight. Whenever Catalans wave the red cape of a distinct identity, a chunk of middle Spain lowers its horns and charges. The Madrid-based media splenetically denounce Catalan nationalism. Just as left-wingers in Britain saw a ban on fox-hunting as a way of spiting toffs, so some Catalans see a ban on *la corrida* as a way of taunting (other) Spaniards, an especially popular pastime in an election year. Never mind that Catalonia's own traditions involve similar torments for the hapless animals.

Catalonian fervour can be deceptive. Last month 167 separatist-minded towns and villages held informal referendums. The "free Catalonia" camp took a triumphant 95% of the vote. Yet only 27% of potential voters turned out. If so many Catalans in supposed nationalist hotbeds are so apathetic, a real poll, including cosmopolitan Barcelona and the rest of Catalonia, would surely produce a large no.



The ups and downs of bullfighting

Italian justice

Shameful honour

ROME

Bettino Craxi, a fallen prime minister, is in favour again

A FUGITIVE from justice and the most thoroughly disgraced politician in Italy's modern history, Bettino Craxi, a two-term prime minister, died in Tunisia in 2000. He had fled there six years earlier after losing his parliamentary immunity from arrest. Shortly before that, protesters outside the luxury hotel he used as his home in Rome had humiliatingly pelted him with coins.

As leader of Italy's Socialists from 1976 to 1993, Craxi was among the orchestrators of a system in which the main parties, and their officials, fed off bribes extorted from companies bidding for public contracts. The cost of those kickbacks was routinely added to the price of the work, so this system contributed to the huge public debt under which Italians and their governments now labour. By the time he died, Craxi had been sentenced to a total of 11 years for corruption and illegal party funding, and been convicted or indicted in five other cases.

Yet the residents of Milan, his birthplace, may soon find a thoroughfare named in his honour. As the tenth anniversary of his death nears, on January

19th, the mayor, Letizia Moratti, has told officials to find a central street, square or park to name after Craxi. In Rome President Giorgio Napolitano has agreed to receive a delegation from the Craxi foundation (an outfit that promotes his "cultural and political heritage") and is mulling an invitation to attend a ceremony in parliament.

Rehabilitating Craxi would dispel a cloud over his political protégé, the prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi. A decree by the Craxi government in 1984 secured Mr Berlusconi, then a mere businessman, his virtual monopoly of private television. But, as the prosecutors who put Craxi on trial protested, it also means discrediting them and the judges who convicted him. And all this comes as Mr Berlusconi is poised to introduce reforms that would curb the powers of the judiciary.

Like Craxi in his day, Mr Berlusconi claims he is the victim of a witch hunt by politically motivated magistrates. "The Italians then did not believe Craxi," said his daughter, Stefania, who is a junior minister in the present government. "But today I see they do believe Berlusconi."

The limits of Catalan autonomy still cause heated debate. In one of its trickiest cases, Spain's constitutional court will decide shortly whether to strike out parts of an autonomy charter, passed in 2006 by Spain's parliament and approved in a referendum by Catalonia's 5.5m voters. The court has spent an unhurried three-and-a-half years pondering this, since Spain's opposition People's Party first challenged the charter. An even split between conservative and progressive judges seems to have produced deadlock. Now a decision is said to be imminent. Some believe this may be a defining moment for Spain.

More wordy than radical, the charter talks of Catalonia as a nation and defines a series of matters to be dealt with bilaterally with the Spanish state. It gives extra autonomy to the Catalan justice system. Mostly, though, it gives just small nudges down the long path of devolution.

Yet that path must end somewhere. In effect, the court is being asked to do something that Spain's 1978 constitution ducked: to set limits to powers that can be handed to the 17 regional governments of an already decentralised country. The fathers of the constitution fudged their definition of Spain's three most independent-minded regions—the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia—by calling them nationalities

(ie, neither full-blooded nations nor mere regions). Spaniards have argued over what this means ever since.

The court may strike out parts of the charter or, less controversially, set limits on how it is interpreted. Either way, it will heat up the atmosphere as Catalans prepare to vote for their own parliament in the autumn. This election will have a profound impact on Spain, as Convergence and Union (CiU), the moderate nationalist party that ran Catalonia for 23 years after 1980, may well return to power, ending a seven-year coalition between Socialists, the far left and extreme separatists.

CiU is unlikely to win an absolute majority. So it is likely to be in a similar position to Spain's prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, whose Socialist government in Madrid struggled to pass a budget for 2010. CiU, a party that likes to wield power in Madrid, has enough seats there to offer Mr Zapatero a more stable government. A quid pro quo in Catalonia could easily seal this deal.

That would marginalise both the far left and the extreme separatists, in Catalonia and Spain, perhaps boosting the chances of more liberalising reforms as the government deals with a near-20% unemployment rate. Many outside Catalonia are hoping for a CiU victory. ■