

ANIMAL WELFARE ACTIVISTS TO PROTEST BULLFIGHTING IN SPAIN

The Guggenheim museum in Bilbao is set to be the scene of a vivid protest on Saturday as about 150 semi-naked animal welfare activists, some smeared in red paint to simulate the blood of a dying bull, plan to lie on the museum grounds to demand an end to bullfighting.

Later in the day, a larger protest organized by three animal rights associations is due to be held in front of Bilbao's bullring before the opening corrida of the city's annual festival.

After a decision last month by lawmakers in Catalonia to ban bullfighting in their region starting in 2012, proponents of such a ban have renewed their efforts to spread similar legislation to other parts of Spain.

In Vitoria, which like Bilbao is in the Basque region, activists plastered posters around the city this month showing a man in underwear spitting blood, with banderillas — the barbed sticks used in a corrida — planted in his back.

"We want to benefit from this major success in Catalonia to extend this ban to the rest of the Spanish territory," said a coordinator of the Bilbao event and a representative from an animal welfare association. "But we're not trying to get into any debate about identity and nationalism and any of the arguments that are now being used by politicians that have nothing to do with animal rights."

Indeed, the vote in Catalonia was overshadowed by a fierce political debate over whether the region should be granted a greater degree of autonomy after a disputed ruling by Spain's constitutional court over the issue. Some local politicians argued that bullfighting no longer had its place in Catalan identity.

In turn, Spain's main opposition center-right Popular Party has turned its defense of bullfighting into a rallying cry to protect Spanish values. The party's leader, Mariano Rajoy, attended a bullfight shortly after Catalonia's decision. Mr. Rajoy not only called for people to take more pride in being Spanish but also said the ban was an attack on individual freedom akin to preventing hunting, fishing or motorbike racing.

Galicia is another region where supporters of a ban hold high hopes because bullfighting does not feature so prominently in local traditions. The Canary Islands, meanwhile, banned bullfighting in 1991, several years after the last fight had been held there.

Legal experts like the dean of the IE Law School in Madrid, noted that the government had long anticipated a backlash against bullfighting but expected such pressure to come more from outside than within the country. Spain pushed for a clause to be added to the Treaty of Amsterdam, which amended European Union treaties in 1997, to guarantee that animal welfare considerations would be weighed against Europe's traditional cultures.

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