

World News

Grass-roots agenda sways Spanish politics

TORRELODONES, SPAIN

Environmentalism turns into success against main parties at ballot box

BY RAPHAEL MINDER

Elena Biurrun, the mayor of Torreldones, is not only new to the job but is also an unusual addition to the Spanish political landscape.

Rather than representing one of Spain's two dominant parties, the governing Socialist Party and the main opposition Popular Party, Ms. Biurrun last month became mayor of this town of 22,000 on the outskirts of Madrid at the helm of a local party, Vecinos por Torreldones, or Neighbors for Torreldones.

Vecinos did not start out as a political party. Instead, it grew out of an environmental protest group that Ms. Biurrun and others formed to block a real estate project that had the backing of the town hall but would have threatened 128 hectares, or 316 acres, of protected woodland. The group's successful environmental crusade, which went as far as filing a complaint with the European Commission, convinced members that they could make other improvements to life in Torreldones by running for office.

Gonzalo Santamaria Puente, now the deputy mayor, said achieving cost cuts was relatively easy in a town with "an envelope culture," whereby kickbacks would be offered to secure contracts. In addition, he said, most past contracts involved "useless middlemen who each had to get a share."

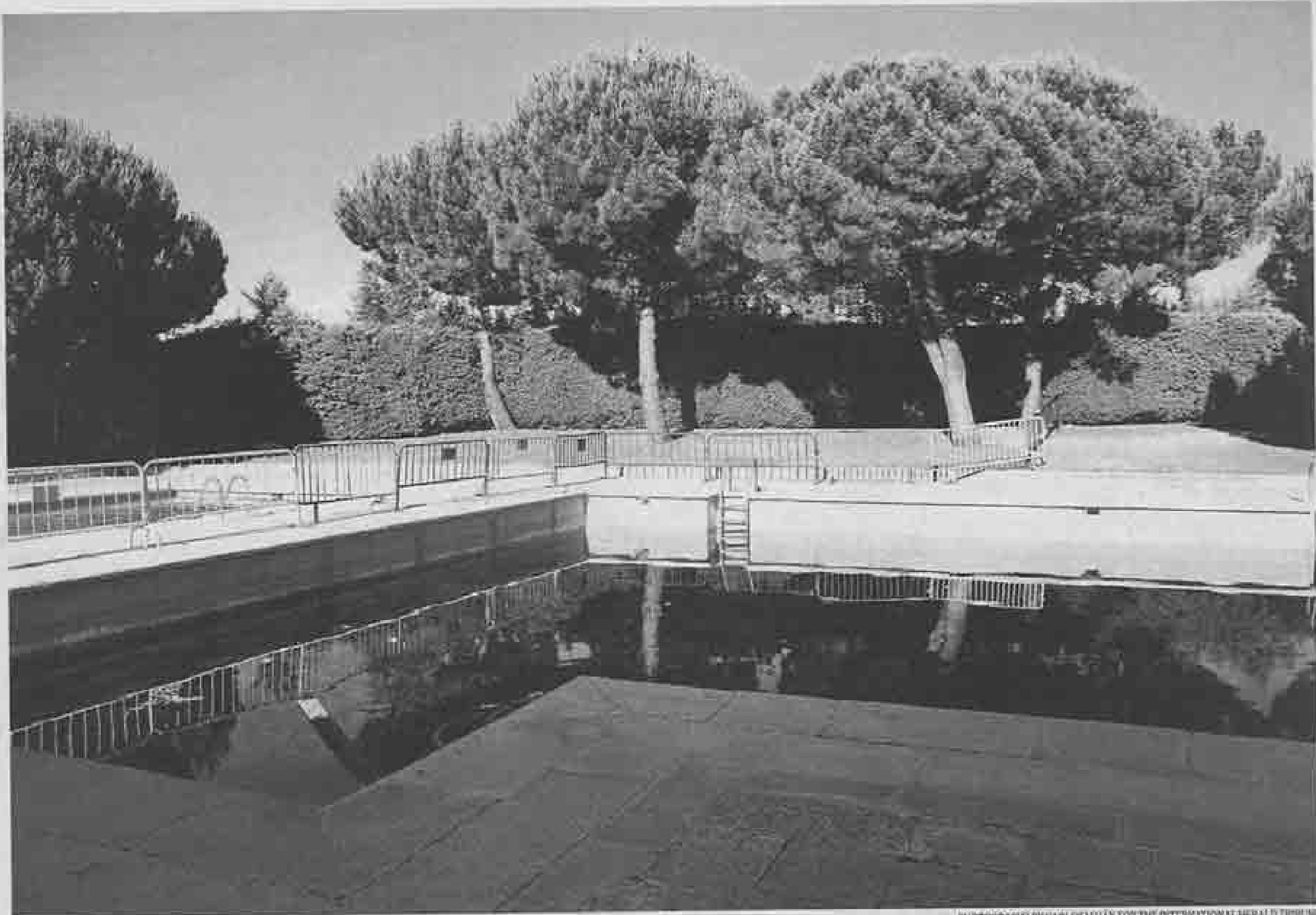
But traffic congestion and other complaints might not yield to quick solutions since such problems arguably stem more from excessive development than mismanagement. Torreldones, for instance, opened a public swimming pool in 1982. But the pool has been closed for three years after it was found to leak, and dwindling revenue could no longer pay for repairs.

"There has clearly been mismanagement here, but that doesn't mean there's an obvious way to make a pool profitable again in a place where most families now own their own private pool," said José Antonio Mur, who is responsible for the town's sports services.

Torreldones escaped the financial crisis relatively unscathed. Its unemployment rate is below 5 percent, compared with 21 percent nationwide. The Vecinos Party benefited considerably from the support of bankers, media celebrities and diplomats who make this suburb their home.

"Rich and educated people moved here with very high expectations, and the fantastic thing is that such people then decided not just to sit back and stay disappointed," said Francesca Milne, who commutes between Torreldones and Madrid, 30 kilometers, or 19 miles, away.

For example, Mariano Barroso, a movie director who lives in Torreldones,



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLOS LOJAN FOR THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

An abandoned pool in Torreldones, Spain, that has been closed for three years after it was found to leak and dwindling revenue could no longer pay for repairs.



Gonzalo Santamaria Puente, deputy mayor, and Elena Biurrun, mayor. The unemployment rate in Torreldones is below 5 percent, compared with 21 percent nationwide.

helped develop the party's communications strategy. Ms. Biurrun's message is that, even if her party does not hold wider regional or national ambitions, it serves as an example of how political change can be achieved by op-

erating outside traditional channels.

Her victory also coincides with a youth-led movement that has been demanding an overhaul of Spain's political system. The protesters have accused traditional parties and other institu-

tions of putting their interests ahead of those of the citizens, even at a time of record unemployment.

"I consider the Vecinos Party to be the real pioneers by already making the switch from indignation to engagement," Mr. Barroso said.

The electoral success of the Vecinos was also unexpected because it ousted the Popular Party from a mayorship it had held for more than two decades in this rightist stronghold. Overlooking Torreldones is the Palacio del Canto del Pico, a summer residence of Spain's former dictator, Francisco Franco.

Javier Laorden, who took over as the Popular Party's leader in January, acknowledged that the Vecinos Party had "fully capitalized on the discontent in Spain with traditional politicians" and had run a "magnificent" campaign.

But he also said that his party's own belated decision to overhaul its lineup in Torreldones, including his own appointment, had prompted "a boomerang effect" and led to damaging internal party feuding.

"Every major renovation effort has its costs, and we took action to improve our party functioning much too close to this election deadline," he said.

Mr. Laorden also voiced skepticism

about the Vecinos' reform agenda. "I don't believe this is the kind of movement that can overhaul politics in Spain, because genuine reform movements always emerge from among the needy," he said. "I can understand that a jobless youngster calls himself indignant, but not somebody who doesn't need to work and has a €2 million house."

Since taking office, Ms. Biurrun and her team have focused on renegotiating supplier contracts in a town that has debt totaling €13 million, or nearly \$19 million. The company that provides school bus services, for instance, recently agreed to cut the value of its contract by 30 percent.

At a time of austerity, another of Ms. Biurrun's priorities is trying to lead by example. She cut her own annual salary to €49,000 from the €63,000 that her predecessor earned. Gone also are his chauffeur-driven car and round-the-clock police escort.

"Nobody in our team had previously held any party membership, and our only shared ideology is that of common sense," Ms. Biurrun said in an interview. "Politics, at least at a local level, should be about providing the sound management that residents deserve rather than parading around with a party tattoo."