

A Portuguese Middle-Age Crisis?

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Fifty years after the democratic transition, Portugal is facing a deep political crisis of which the growth of the extreme right is the most dangerous symptom. The motto of the Carnation Revolution – democratise, develop, decolonise – was not a one-off task but a long-term commitment that needs to be renewed.

Portuguese voters will head to the polls on 9 June to decide who will represent them at the European Parliament. These elections arrive amidst a substantial reconfiguration of Portugal's party system. Snap national elections in March had been preceded by months of collective voter anxiety stemming from the corruption charges facing the government, uncertainty over the accuracy of polling (in 2022, the Partido Socialista won an absolute majority against most predictions), and more. They produced a narrow victory for the centre-right coalition Aliança Democrática. Luis Montenegro, the leader of the centre-right Partido Social Democrata (PSD), was appointed prime minister. His government has the support of 80 MPs out of 230. To their left, 78 Socialist MPs lead the opposition. Elsewhere are 22 MPs from different parties representing both Left and Right, none of which gained more than 5 per cent of the vote. And occupying the remaining 50 seats are MPs from the far-right Chega, whom we can expect to bring to parliament the kind of toxic politics they so expertly spread in online and offline life. Admittedly, there were better ways for Portugal to celebrate 50 years since its democratic revolution. Or perhaps not.

Elections, elections, elections

To an extent, the beauty of democracy is its capacity to produce mistakes that can be democratically resolved. And the last few years have been rich in democratic practice for Portugal. In elections in 2015, the centre-right coalition came first place, but did not secure a majority. This meant the Antonio Costa-led Socialists formed a government that was supported in parliament by the Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) and the Partido Comunista Português. For the first time in Portuguese democratic politics, the party with the most votes did not lead the cabinet; but also for the first time, the far left was providing parliamentary backing to a Socialist prime minister. Costa promised to “turn the page” on the austerity policies that had accompanied the 2011-2014 bailouts of the European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF – otherwise known as the “Troika” – but his political arrangement was equally consequential.

Though it did not fall into Trump-like electoral denialism, the Portuguese Right remained uncomfortable with the political “contraption” that allowed the Socialists to govern despite coming second at the polls. But the 2015 formula proved popular: in the 2019 elections, the parties of the Left increased their vote share, and formed a “contraption 2.0”. This time, however, the Socialists had broader political support than the far left, and the government's political project was less clear.

As the Left grew, the Right underwent a substantial reconfiguration: it became both more fragmented and more radicalised. In 2019, two new political formations entered parliament with roughly the same number of votes. One of these, the centre-right Iniciativa Liberal, demonstrated savvy political communication and kept its messaging to simple calls for a reduced role of the state in society: “more

freedom”, “less taxation” and otherwise. This was an ideological movement for those who saw the post-2010 “structural adjustment” of the Troika as unfinished business.

To its right, Chega appeared as a one-man show by former TV pundit André Ventura, who became famous for his insights on football and crime stories. Years before, while a law student at University College Cork in Ireland, Ventura had written a thesis arguing against ‘criminal populism’ and the ‘stigmatisation of minorities’. But in 2017, when Ventura was picked by the PSD to run for Mayor of Loures, a constituency in the suburbs of Lisbon, his campaign became notorious for targeting the Roma community and making a theme of the “Roma problem” in Portugal. Running as leader of his own party in 2019, Ventura went further in loudly voicing well-known, cowardly, racist tropes that, in some corners of politics, still have the semblance of “freshness” and “irreverence”.

With an unprecedentedly fragmented parliament, Costa counted on the support of the far left to pass national budgets, and on more ad hoc political arrangements to pursue the remainder of his political programme. The economic formula of the government became relatively simple: a combination of frugal fiscal policies and expansive income policies. Minimum wages grew considerably without driving up unemployment. At the same time, the Socialists prided themselves on fiscal surpluses and declining debt ratios, which allowed Costa to successfully cater to both Left and Right.

The stress test came with the pandemic, and Costa succeeded, with the far left supporting an increase in public spending for healthcare infrastructure. Yet the parties’ differences soon became irreconcilable. Bloco claimed that healthcare expenditure could not be decreased in the midst of the pandemic, and therefore that Costa’s proposed budget for 2021 should not pass. It eventually did, but only with a razor-thin majority granted by the Communists. In late 2021, however, they too withdrew their political support, and the “contraption” broke. This was enough for President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa to call for new elections.

Confounding many, Costa managed to obtain a large parliamentary majority in January 2022, meaning he was able to govern without the burden of dealing with other parties. But scandals began to accumulate: ministers resigned at a remarkable pace, the government’s management of public services proved to be underwhelming, and an emboldened new right played up narratives of ‘Katastrophenpolitik’ to present a picture of a country in chaos. The citation of Costa in a corruption investigation and the 75,000 euros in cash found in his chief of staff’s office in November 2023 were *la goutte de trop*. The prime minister stepped down and the president called, once again, for elections. This time, the Socialists were punished at the polls and the far right rose.

Is it the economy, stupid?

There is a longstanding assumption that, for the most part, elections are decided on economic grounds. The Clinton Administration’s mantra, ‘It’s the economy, stupid!’, is the best illustration of this. Yet, when the Portuguese went to the polls in March 2024, eight years into the Socialists’ rule, the economy seemed to be in fairly good shape. Unemployment rates were at their lowest level since the early 2000s. Wages had steadily grown since the first “contraption” government (the minimum wage went from 505 euros per month in 2015 to 820 euros in 2024). Economic growth was relatively robust. And the country was finally seeing its public debt ratios decrease, signalling the success of perhaps the most widely shared policy goal of the previous decade. It is hard, in our contemporary understanding of what a “good economy” is, to believe that Portugal’s was a bad one at the time of the elections. And yet, the Socialists lost over 40 MPs and had to leave government. This turned Clinton’s mantra into a question: Is it really the economy?

To some degree, it is. But our conception of the “economy” (and of its *political* consequences) needs a little more sophistication than what is offered in the briefing notes of national statistics offices. Since the crisis and austerity turn of the early 2010s, the economic discourse of the country has been dominated by a diffuse obsession with “competitiveness”. The preoccupation is pervasive in discourses from Left to Right. We see it in Portugal, but also across Europe, and as a defining feature of the economic thinking that dominates EU institutions.

In the past few years in Portugal, this discourse has focused in particular on how Portugal is faring relative to Eastern European countries. Anyone watching Portuguese politics will have heard a variation on “even Romania is surpassing us” – a lament based solely on GDP projections. There was no substantive debate about Romania’s prosperity, no thorough comparison of the two countries’ experience of the previous crises, no discussion about public and economic infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe, no reflection on the durable lags in educational attainment that remain one of the most profound legacies of the Portuguese dictatorship. In a nutshell, the fixation on Eastern economic growth was less admiration than indignation. After all, in the Portuguese consciousness, the only thing that is known about these countries is that “they are poor”. A GDP projection suggesting that after years of Socialist rule, we might be even poorer managed to flip the national narrative on post-crisis economic success.

These economic discourses are not the exclusive domain of the Right. On the Left, Livre (Free) proposed further raises in minimum wages in order to ensure Portugal doesn’t gain a reputation as a land of low wages and low qualifications. Yet, there is no doubt that the “dangerous obsession”, as Paul Krugman once called it, with competitiveness was on the minds of most right-wing politicians. When the Left came to power in 2015, the ousted right-wing prime minister Pedro Passos Coelho warned of the “coming devil” – an eccentric suggestion of what would befall Portugal if the austerity page was indeed turned.

Coelho’s pious warning was evidence of something significant: the Portuguese Right had no economic programme besides the continuation of the Troika structural adjustment. To this day, the Right has a difficult time discussing austerity, shifting back and forth between the narratives of “external imposition” and “structural imperative”. Indeed, the memory of austerity was still present in this latest electoral campaign. Images of elderly women castigating incoming prime minister Luis Montenegro because his party “stole” their pensions made the rounds on social media and primetime television. Montenegro sought to juggle ideas around “saving the country” through austerity with “reconciliation” with disenfranchised constituencies. This fragile ideological balancing act was added to a discourse of “permanent crisis” that, to the untrained ear, made Portugal seem like a quasi-failed nation.

Land of a million racists?

The troubles of the traditional Right were compounded by its radicalised branch. Chega is, after all, an embarrassing offshoot of the political coalition that governed the country during the eurozone crisis. Its leader was handpicked by Passos Coelho to be mayoral candidate in 2017 and its cadres came in large numbers from the two historical centre-right parties, the Social Democrats (PSD) and the Christian Democrats (CDS) – the latter the junior coalition partner of the 2011-2015 government, which has since lost most of its political relevance.

Chega is an experiment in the extension of the Overton window of political possibility: it grabbed all the racist tropes and veiled insinuations around “those who do not want to work” that were common in the Portuguese Right and ran with them. Years before anyone knew Ventura, political figures like Paulo

Portas (former leader of CDS and deputy prime minister to Passos Coelho) called for the need to “separate the wheat from the chaff” in social protection schemes. Whereas Portas covered his dog whistling with proper discourses on “structural reforms”, the need for “efficiency” and the preoccupation with public finances, Ventura does not bother. Add a little “fascism for dummies”, and suddenly we are told the Portuguese people are being sucked to the bone by a racial minority which does not want to work, which does not wish to conform to our modes of life, and whose supposed “largesse” is paid for by the sweat and toil of hard-working “decent people”.

For the purpose of the far right’s scapegoating, it doesn’t matter that the anti-poverty scheme costs little over 300 million euros, or 0.16 per cent of national GDP, annually. According to [a report by the Court of Auditors](#), the average recipient of the programme earns less than 90 euros per month. A family of four that is both in enough destitution to access it and is capable of managing all the associated bureaucratic hurdles has its benefits capped at around 500 euros per month. And if we turn to taxation, we face another sobering reality: nearly half of the population in a country whose median monthly salary is around 1000 euros does not pay any income tax. The social violence of categorising “deserving” and “undeserving” poor serves the sole purpose of evading the problem of poverty altogether. The pledge of the radicalised Right to “clean Portugal” – as seen on campaign ads across the country – can only resonate if the misperception is preserved. At least for those in good faith.

But some do not act in good faith – and this is perhaps a more difficult conversation. Attitude surveys have consistently made clear that a high percentage of Portuguese people still hold openly racist beliefs. According to the [European Social Survey](#), a majority of people across all social classes agreed that some ethnic or racial groups were naturally more hardworking than others – a reflection of our continued ties to fictions about our colonial past and our post-colonial present. The radicalised Right capitalises on this. Whilst Ventura [calls for a black MP](#) to “be returned to her country of origin”, [calls out the president](#) for hanging out with “thugs” because of a picture taken of him with a Black family, and suggests [confining the Roma community](#) during the pandemic, his party still manages to take to the streets with [banners stating “Portugal is not racist”](#). Oxford-based political scientist Vicente Valentim captured this in the title of his most recent book on the normalisation of the far right: [the end of shame](#).

Legacies of imperial rule are still pervasive, both in the prevalence of racist attitudes and in the twisted ways in which we collectively deny them.

In the last elections, Chega obtained over a million votes, equating to more than 18 per cent of votes. Subsequent commentary fixated on whether Portugal could really have over a million racists. The sad truth is that the number is most likely underestimated. Until recently Portugal was considered the exception to the rise of the far-right in Europe – something often attributed to its history of fascism and dictatorship and the rejection of the ideologies its rulers pushed. But part of that legacy is also a long history of producing complacent narratives that Portugal is not racist. Historian José Pedro Monteiro provides several illustrations of this in a [recent piece](#). One goes that at the height of the Portuguese colonial empire in Africa in the early 1960s, the International Labour Organisation requested the country’s authorities to submit their anti-discrimination legislation. The Portuguese representative at the ILO replied that he would need to submit the entirety of the country’s legislation, because it was thoroughly non-discriminatory. In Portugal, he said, “there was no racial discrimination”.

What to do with 50 years of democracy?

On 25 April, Portugal commemorated 50 years of the peaceful Carnation Revolution of 1974, which brought a half-century of dictatorship to an end. Hundreds of thousands of people went out on the street. But in the official ceremony, as nearly the entire parliament chanted the hymn of the revolution (Zeca Afonso's *Grândola Vila Morena*), the 50 MPs of Chega, just elected, left the room. Next year we will celebrate 50 years of the Constituent Assembly elections. And one year later, we shall commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first elections for the first democratic parliament as well as for the presidency. With so many events, it is easy to get lost in the significance of each one. Celebrating democracy becomes harder as the collective memory of what came before fades.

But perhaps we can find comfort in that difficulty. The military officers that led the Carnation Revolution had a political programme summarised in three famous "Ds" that every Portuguese schoolkid knows: Democratise, Develop, Decolonise. There was then a clear understanding that none of the three was optional. We would be mistaken to now consider these three "Ds" to be a matter only of the late 1970s. As for democratisation, Portugal's democratic institutions remain vulnerable to heated reactions by political leaders and the electorate to contentious events, like the corruption investigation that contributed to Costa's downfall. These together have resulted in extraordinary sequences of elections. In terms of development, the staggering economic development over the past half-century risks being stalled by a fixation on competitiveness and the magic thinking of "structural adjustment". And as for decolonisation, the territories of Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Vert, and São Tomé and Príncipe ceased to be part of the Portuguese Empire in the mid-1970s. But just as for the other two "Ds", the work did not stop there. Legacies of imperial rule are still pervasive, both in the prevalence of racist attitudes and in the twisted ways in which we collectively deny them.

As the Carnation Revolution turns 50, it feels like Portugal is living through a collective middle-age crisis. But this also reminds us, especially those who did not witness the Revolution directly, that 1974 initiated a never-ending programme. This must be about strengthening our democratic institutions, developing a model of economy and society that generates inclusive prosperity and well-being, and breaking down entrenched racism and discrimination. These are not policies, but principles which guided the reconstruction of Portuguese society after its long night. We should reappropriate and reimagine them for our time. The latest election was a sad day for most of us. It also showed how much is still to be done.

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