DOSSIER - THE CARNATION REVOLUTION: PERSPECTIVES AND LEGACIES

The democratisation of Portugal and its legacies

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The end of the empire. Lisbon, 1975. The Monument of the Discoveries, surrounded by boxes containing the belongings of returnees repatriated to Portugal after the African colonies gained independence. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

Compared with other democracies of southern Europe, the main feature of the democratisation of Portugal during the 1970s was that the rupture with the previous authoritarian regime took place simultaneously with a state crisis. [1]

With a transition marked by a radical but unclear attempt to completely eradicate the legacy of authoritarianism, which in turn became an added legacy for the consolidation of democracy, the regime change process triggered a severe crisis of state following the military coup of 1974. The simultaneous occurrence of democratisation and decolonisation processes was the most important aspect of this crisis. The decolonisation issue was the main factor of the conflict that erupted shortly after the fall of the regime between a small group of conservative generals and the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), which had planned and executed the coup. This conflict was at the heart of military intervention in political life after overthrowing the dictatorship.

The nature of the transition, and especially the state crisis it unleashed, is crucial for explaining some of its more radical features, and some of the attitudes towards the authoritarian past that emerged during this period. Both converged to form a twin legacy

for the consolidation of democracy. However, from 1976 onwards, the process of democratic consolidation was conditioned above all by the way in which the legacies inherited from the transition were handled, eventually taking the form of a prolonged sequence of “partial agreements” between civilian and military elites.

With the victory of the “moderate” forces on 25 November 1975, and the consequent political and military neutralisation of the revolutionary left, it was possible, during 1976, to lead Portugal toward the rapid institutionalisation of a representative democracy. The events of 25 November allowed a process of internal restructuring of the armed forces to begin, based on the depoliticisation and gradual restoration of traditional discipline and hierarchy, jointly with the removal of radical military personnel and the dissolution of the parallel “revolutionary” structures that had fragmented and divided the military institution during the period 1974-1975.

An anti-authoritarian democracy

In the context of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of democracy in 2023, the legacy of the initial phase of the transition to democracy was once again in the spotlight at the Parliament and in the commemorations of 5 October, when the far-right populist party Chega accused the President of the Assembly of the Republic of wanting to avoid commemorating 25 November 1975. The mayor of Lisbon, Carlos Moedas, of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the main centre-right party, said that he would commemorate it, against opposition from other parties, who insisted that what unites should be commemorated, not what divides. This “war of memory” between the November “warriors” and the April “warriors”, to use the expression coined by the political scientists Filipa Raimundo and Claudia Almeida, is perhaps the only one that has made itself felt from time to time in recent years, because attention has been more focussed on the legacy of the colonial wars and the late colonial period. [2]

During the years of democratic consolidation, Portugal was noted for having a multi-party system characterised by endemic governmental instability. There were minority governments formed by the Socialist Party (PS), coalitions between the PS and the Social Democratic Centre (CDS), independent governments appointed by president Ramalho Eanes and centre-right coalitions between the PSD and the CDS. Meanwhile, the right-wing and centre-right parties, followed with some hesitation by the PS, reshaped their political programmes and immediately put on the political agenda the need to eliminate certain “socialist” legacies of the transition that were written in the Constitution and in the pacts with the military. The communists, by now out of the government, became the only party to defend the “socialist” legacies of the transition, enshrined in the 1976 Constitution.

> During the late 1970s, in Portugal, a climate of political reconciliation prevailed that determined the way the government approached the legacy of the dictatorship

The official position of the first two constitutional governments led by the socialist prime minister Mário Soares and the first democratically elected president, Ramalho Eanes, favoured reconciliation and the pacification of Portuguese society. According to the official position of Mário Soares' PS and the democratic centre-right parties, Portugal's democracy was shaped by a two-fold legacy: right-wing authoritarianism under the Estado Novo (the name of the dictatorial, corporatist regime that ruled the country from 1933 to 1974) and the authoritarian threat of the far left in 1975, which was officially considered an attempt by the communists to take power. Thus, the aim was to establish a particular "institutional memory" about the origins of contemporary Portuguese democracy, which survived the consolidation of democracy, albeit with minor differences, both in the PS and in the PSD.

The purges were quickly stopped, their role was reappraised and it was accepted that they were an excess of the transition period. At the same time, a number of communists and far-left civilian and military personalities were removed from their positions in the armed forces, the civil service and state-run enterprises, in a sort of counter-purge, particularly within the armed forces. However, during the late 1970s, a climate of political reconciliation prevailed that would determine how the government approached the legacy of the dictatorship. This was very clear with the trial of the members of the political police, that is, the International and State Defence Police (PIDE)/General Directorate of Security (DGS). Their trial was conducted in accordance with the new post-revolutionary political ethos and, consequently, those who did not take advantage of the limited coercive measures to flee the country only received light sentences from the military courts (usually corresponding to the time spent in pre-trial detention). Good conduct in active military service during the colonial war was also an extenuating factor. Although there were public demonstrations and criticisms of the sentences handed down, the trials served as a reminder that judicial legality and the rule of law had been restored after the "excesses" of 1974-1975.

Between 1976 and the early 1980s, measures were taken to reintegrate those who had been victims of the purges. New laws were passed and measures were quickly taken to normalise the situation in the enterprises where the "savage" purges had been most severe. The Government adopted a series of measures aimed at facilitating the return of exiles (mainly business owners and executives) who had been forced to leave the country due to the radicalisation of social movements. The vetting committees in the ministries ceased to function in 1976 and the Council of the Revolution, which took over their functions, strengthened the legal mechanisms to guarantee a rehabilitation process. A moderate member of the Council of the Revolution, Captain Sousa e Castro, was given the job of overseeing the whole process. The Committee for Analysing Remediation and Reclassification Resources (CARSR) was created under the auspices of the Council of the Revolution, which continued to function until the mid-1980s, and rehabilitated the vast majority of the people who had been purged. According to a report on its activities, the CARSR considered that it was "necessary to repair the harm done" during the period 1974-1975, because many purges were "purely arbitrary". Most of those who were removed from their posts in 1974 and 1975 had their sanction changed to forced retirement. In the case of the agents of the PIDE/DGS, the CARSR followed the precedent set by the military courts and restored their rights as civil servants, but only if they had not "taken part in

illegal activities".

It was during this period that the "historical memory" of the political parties that would come to dominate Portuguese democracy was fixed. This memory was developed in the official discourse on the occasion of the celebrations to mark the first anniversary of 25 April 1974. Throughout these years, there was one common denominator shared by the CDS, the PSD and the PS (although with some minor differences): the first democratic elections of 1975 as the founding event of Portuguese democracy and its role in resisting the "totalitarian perversion" of 1975. The PS insisted on the idea that the events of 25 November represented the "reconciliation of democracy with itself" and not the anti-communist revanchism that some populist right-wingers would have wished for.



A grocer's shop in Vila Franca de Xira displays the front page of the Diário de Notícias newspaper announcing the nationalisation of all banks on 14 March 1975. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

As mentioned earlier, the CDS, which had been the target of several violent attacks during the first years of the transition, encountered difficulties in asserting itself in the new legality. Its political legitimacy finally materialised with the defeat of the communists in 1975 and it was the only party that did not vote in favour of the 1976 Constitution. The CDS also attempted to equate the events of 25 November 1975 with those of 25 April 1974. For the PSD, the 1975 elections and the "popular resistance" to communism were one of the elements of its discourse celebrating Portuguese democracy. Despite this, and above all during the early years of democratic consolidation, some of its leaders' record of resistance to the dictatorship became a significant factor in the PSD's efforts to create a separate

space from the CDS. Throughout the period of democratic consolidation, the PSD also set itself apart from the PS by speaking out against the transition's military and economic legacy.

Heir to the political culture of anti-Salazarist republicanism, the PS almost immediately made use of its leaders' strong anti-authoritarian track record against the right-wing parties. The PS was also the dominant party in the fight against the communists in 1975 and, during the early years of Portugal's democracy, transformed itself into a party very close to the centre of the political spectrum. The role of the PS in the fight against communism in 1975 became a central part of its political identity and it was not until 30 years after the fall of the dictatorship that it began to show signs of abandoning this "twin legacy" approach in its official discourse. Thus, the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) became the sole defender of the legacy of the April Revolution contained in the 1976 Constitution, in particular, the land reform and the nationalisations that the first constitutional governments sought to reverse.

> Portugal's political institutions developed a strong anti-authoritarian "memory policy"

In 1985, on the eve of Portugal's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC), the idea of the twin legacy had virtually ceased to have any presence in institutional terms. There were no longer any right-wing parties of any parliamentary or electoral significance that represented the former elite or advocated the authoritarian values inherited from Salazarism, and the legacy of military tutelage and state socialism had also disappeared after the constitutional reforms of 1982 and 1989.

"Memory policies" in Portuguese democracy

Portugal's political institutions developed a strong anti-authoritarian "memory policy", as they associated it with the legacy of political opposition to the dictatorship. The semipresidential nature of the political system and the fact that the first two civilian presidents (Mário Soares and Jorge Sampaio) were active members of opposition movements during the dictatorship had considerable symbolic significance. During the first 30 years of democracy, successive presidents posthumously rehabilitated many victims of the dictatorship and decorated members of the anti-Salazar opposition with the Order of Freedom. Streets and other public spaces were renamed after well-known republican, communist and socialist opposition figures, while Salazar's name, which was not widely used, was removed from almost all monuments and squares and the bridge over the Tagus River in Lisbon, which was quickly renamed the 25 April bridge.

Another aspect of the attempt to symbolically delegitimise the authoritarian past was the change of national holidays. The date of the Republican revolution, 5 October 1910, was given greater prominence, while the state holiday of 28 May, which commemorated the

military coup of 1926, was replaced by 25 April, to celebrate the foundation of the new democratic regime. Another dimension of the legacy of the transition is the presence of a strong civil education programme in state-run schools. Although the more left-leaning ideological orientation of the textbooks written during the transition has evolved over time, as the political scientist Robert Fishman has pointed out, in this aspect “Portugal seems to follow, albeit at a distance, the example of Europe’s first post-revolutionary republican democracy, France, the world leader in citizenship education”. [3]

From the 1970s onwards, attempts were also made to compensate the activists who fought against the dictatorship, although some of the proposals did not initially meet with parliamentary approval. Opponents of the dictatorship had to wait until 1997 for a PS government to introduce legislation allowing them to claim Social Security contributions and pensions for the years they had lived in hiding or in exile.

The difficulties in describing the early period of the transition in the “institutional memory” persisted until the new millennium. One example was the official exhibition, sponsored by president Jorge Sampaio and António Guterres’ socialist government, celebrating 25 years of democracy in Portugal. The exhibition was aimed both at students and at the general public. Thousands of visitors toured the dark paths of Salazarism, the political police’s torture chambers and corridors filled with photographs of political prisoners, while opposition figures and the pro-democracy press were celebrated. There was an ominous corridor devoted to the colonial war, which ended in a well-lit area that celebrated the fall of the dictatorship. Significantly, the exhibition ended where democracy began. It omitted the turbulent period of the early years of the transition, represented symbolically by thematic panels describing the process of social and political change that had taken place during the 25 years since the fall of the Salazar regime. Given its legacy, it would have been very difficult for an official exhibition to cover the transition period.

How does contemporary Portuguese society view the authoritarian past and the transition to democracy? Although there are very few surveys that corroborate this, the perception of 25 April 1974 as a positive break with the past and a distrust of democratic institutions seem to coexist in Portugal. Within the context of the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of democracy, a number of opinion polls were commissioned in 2004 on the nature of the country’s transition. In one of the polls, 77% of the respondents said that they felt proud of how the transition had unfolded, while a majority of Portuguese (52%) considered that the coup d’état of 25 April 1974 had been the most important event in the country’s history. When the answers were disaggregated by voting choice, a number of differences were observed: voters of right-wing parties were more likely to believe that Portugal’s accession to the European Union or its independence from Spain in the 17th century were more significant events. The Estado Novo was viewed negatively, while 25 April was viewed positively, while a minority of 17% and 14%, respectively, believed that the dictatorship was a good thing and 25 April was a negative event.

> The end of the Empire, the consolidation of democracy and

> membership of the European Union served to close many of the divisions caused by the transition

Were the divisions of 1975 still present in Portuguese society at the beginning of the 21st century? With the exception of the PCP voters, the answer is no. If we consider that the 1976 Constitution reflected the overwhelming dominance of the left during the transition process, subsequent revisions reveal the influence of the right. The end of the Empire, the consolidation of democracy and membership of the European Union served to close many of the divisions caused by the transition.

Democracy is the preferred regime for 72% of Portuguese citizens, regardless of their age or political convictions. The events of 25 April have been associated positively with an improvement in the population's general standard of living, as 68% of Portuguese citizens believe that Portugal is a better place thanks to the transition to democracy. However, these surveys also show that the Portuguese have a low opinion of the functioning and "quality" of their democracy. And some comparative studies show that, of all European nations, the Portuguese have least confidence in their government institutions.

Until the beginning of the 21st century, Portuguese society had only sporadic public debates, parliamentary initiatives and rare "memory eruptions" within civil society about the authoritarian past. However, a number of episodes brought the past back into the public sphere: a secret interview with a former PIDE inspector who had been tried and convicted in absentia; a pension awarded to a former political police officer for "services to the nation"; and a television programme in which the audience voted the former dictator as the most important Portuguese person in history. However, none of these episodes led to any significant divisions in Portuguese society. The same cannot be said of the colonial past and the dictatorship's colonial wars.

One of the features of Portuguese democracy's "memory policy" has been the contradiction between an attitude of rupture that denounced the dictatorship in 1974-1975 and a "memory erasure" of the colonial war and colonialism during the years of democratic consolidation. The contradiction is partly explained by the fact that the key players of 25 April 1974 were also members of the military resistance to decolonisation. So, there was a "revenge" against the dictatorial past but not against its colonial part, and a diffuse Lusotropicalist exceptionalism has been maintained in the political discourse and in the institutions. [4]

Decolonisation and the Europeanist option generated significant ideological output by certain segments of the intellectual elite, although the "identity crisis" announced so many times never manifested itself in a tangible form. After a phase of recriminations, especially by conservative sectors, expressed in the numerous criticisms of decolonisation in the second half of the 1970s, a number of far-right parties were created, albeit with little success, in an attempt to capitalise on the discontent of the most affected sectors, especially those returning from Africa. The reconversion of conservative ideologies toward

a discourse in defence of a “national identity” threatened by dissolution in a European Union was not particularly successful either.

Discourses advocating a nationalist identity in reaction to dissolution in the European space emerged in Portugal in the 1970s, voiced by a conservatism that instrumentalised the country’s exclusively Atlanticist vocation, on the one hand, and a more economistic defence of the “interests of national productive forces” against European capitalism, on the other. With the myth of the colonies over, the democratic elites managed to consolidate the European option in public opinion as the only one that could restore significant relations with the new Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, as the previous economic relations had disappeared and the political ties had deteriorated after achieving independence in 1975.

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In 1978, three years after decolonisation, the vast majority of Portuguese, almost 70%, thought that “Portugal should have given independence to these countries”, but guaranteeing the rights of the Portuguese nationals living there. Only 2.2% of the respondents were in favour of continuing the struggle against the liberation movements. However, in 1978 there was a significant majority, about 20%, that thought that Portugal could not survive economically without its former colonies. The progressive disappearance of this view seems to be inextricably linked with the prospect of EEC membership. [5]

With the rise, after many years, of a far-right populist party, the activation and radicalisation of “memory policies” have returned from time to time to the political arena and public space. As the dictatorial past seems less likely to be mobilised by the far right, the debate focuses more on the legacies of colonialism than on the democratic transition, marked above all by the resurgence of the 25 November celebrations.

REFERENCES AND FOOTNOTES

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3 — Fishman, R. M. (2019). *Democratic Practice: Origins of the Iberian Divide in Political Inclusion.* Oxford (Regne Unit): Oxford University Press, p. 49.
4 — Lusotropicalism is a theory developed by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre according to which Portuguese colonisation was different from other European colonisations in the tropics and that this difference manifested in miscegenation and cultural interpenetration.
5 — See: Bruneau, T. C.; MacLeod, A. (1986). *Politics in Contemporary Portugal: Parties and the Consolidation of Democracy.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner.



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