The international impact of the April Revolution: a review

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Álvaro Cunhal and Mário Soares arrive in Mozambique to attend the country's independence ceremony on 25 June 1975. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

> "The Portuguese Revolution placed the country at the centre of the international political stage. For a year and a half, it became an unstable element in the world's bipolar political organisation. After [...] decades of Portuguese democracy, we must recognise that the significance of what happened on 25 April 1974 was not only important domestically." [1]

The April Revolution had a number of significant effects on the international stage. Firstly, the collapse of the dictatorship marked the end of the colonial war and the start of decolonisation, which, together with democratisation, provided the opportunity for closer relations with the European Communities, culminating in Portugal's membership. Secondly, the Revolution aroused great international interest in the context of Cold War detente, and not only among the superpowers: notably, post-Franco Spain and other European states paid close attention to developments in the Portuguese political situation. Thirdly, the

academic literature has generalised the idea that the April Revolution in Portugal marked the start of the third wave of democratisation, a thesis we will examine here.

The orientation of foreign policy in democratic Portugal

The April Revolution marked a significant change in Portuguese foreign policy. In the last decades of the fascist dictatorship, in the context of broad international support for the decolonisation of continental Africa, its policy focussed on the strategic priority of maintaining the African colonies. The major colonial war fought on three fronts (from 1961 in Angola, from 1963 in Guinea-Bissau and from 1964 in Mozambique) not only generated domestic tensions and discontent, it also increased international pressure on Portugal, placing the county in a situation of almost total international isolation, even among its main allies.

One of the central objectives of the Carnation Revolution and the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) was to bring the colonial war to an end and grant independence to the African colonies. Between 1974 and 1975, Portugal recognised the right to self-determination and independence of Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Angola, along with Indian sovereignty over Goa and Daman and Diu (territories that had been lost militarily in 1961), thereby accelerating the more general process of African decolonisation. From that time on, the doors opened to restoring relations between the former metropolis and former colonies, based on fairer cooperation. Nevertheless, it took some time for these relations to gain significant momentum, both because attempts to achieve a negotiated and orderly decolonisation created mistrust among the new African states and because they were deeply marked by the hasty return of thousands of Portuguese living in the colonies (the “returned”), marking the end of the decolonisation process. [2]

Portugal also opted for full membership of the European Communities, which could only be achieved by making up the political ground towards this goal that had been lost by the dictatorship. The possibility of transforming a relationship of limited economic cooperation (established in the trade agreement that created a free trade zone for industrial products between Portugal and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1972) into full economic and political integration stemmed from both the democratisation of Portugal and the Europeanism adopted by Portuguese foreign policy under democracy, marked by membership of the Council of Europe and application for EEC membership in 1977. This choice was decisive for the country’s economic development and modernisation and as a means of consolidating the domestic political transition. It also became a fundamental element in Portuguese foreign policy after the end of empire, as the EEC provided a space in which to influence the international sphere and project Portugal’s objectives to the world, as well as to participate in European decision-making processes. The enlargement of the European Communities to include Greece (1981) and Portugal and Spain (1986) provided continuation to European integration and represented an important step in the process of consolidating democracy, similar to the enlargements in 2004 and 2007 in Eastern Europe. [3]

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Thus, Portugal has moved from its isolationist attitude to become a country that today strongly defends multilateralism, values its participation in international organisations (NATO, the European Union and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries, among many others), is considered a net contributor to international security, specifically through its participation in international missions, and whose diplomatic relations place equal weight on many different areas (economic, political, cultural, social and security). [4]

The reception of the Revolution among Portugal's allies

One of the fundamental elements of contemporary Portuguese foreign policy to remain unchanged under democracy and dictatorship is Portugal's participation in NATO, as a founder member, since 1949. However, after the April Revolution, this participation was marked by special attention on Portugal from its allies, as developments in the Ongoing Revolutionary Process [5] between 1974 and 1976 and the leftward turn of the country raised concerns over Portugal's potential domestic political orientation. There were fears it might become a "Trojan horse" within the organisation, in the context of the Cold War and the ideological confrontation between superpowers..

In international terms, it was also a period in which, as a result of decolonisation, Portugal switched from being almost totally internationally isolated to forging an enormous diversity of international relations as between 1974 and 1980 it recognised and established diplomatic relations with over 50 states (essentially in Africa, Asia and the Eastern bloc). At the same time, ideas of an "independent" foreign policy, not just open to relations with all states but also adopting a more "third-world" orientation (i.e. less associated with the specific framework of the two Cold War blocs, by taking a more neutral stance, distanced from them, and moving closer to the unaligned Third World), exerted a degree of intellectual seduction on the Ongoing Revolutionary Process. However, it never became a viable alternative foreign policy. Hence, Portugal has never really questioned its participation in NATO, which has remained a structural element in its foreign policy and a fundamental pillar of its security and defence policy, despite the fact that the Constitution of the Portuguese Democratic Republic, which came into force in 1976 and has remained unaltered in this aspect up to now, requires Portugal to advocate for the dissolution of politico-military blocks. [6]

If this approach has been a fundamental element in the international response to the April Revolution, it is important to contextualise this in the time and the evolution of the political situation in Portugal. Most of the states with which Portugal maintained relevant diplomatic relations soon recognised the National Salvation Junta as the new political power in Portugal, with a positive vision for the end of the dictatorship, the promise of a civil

government and an end to the colonial war. However, the tensions between different forces within the Revolution (broadly speaking, those represented by General Spínola, with a formula that maintained some relations with the colonies, and the MFA, which tended towards immediate and unconditional decolonisation) together with the above-mentioned evolution of the internal political situation and its possible consequences for NATO's political cohesion as an alliance, meant Portugal's main allies in Western Europe and the United States remained keenly interested in the political developments in the country. [7]

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On the one hand, the Soviet Union did not have a well-developed strategy to suggest any special interest in the Portuguese situation. Indeed, the context of international detente in its relations with the USA, which it considered a priority, meant the Soviet Union made less effort to influence Portuguese political life, although it still supported the actions taken by the MFA and the governments, as they marked the leftward evolution of the Ongoing Revolutionary Process, bearing in mind there was a certain ideological proximity, as yet undefined, and a common goal of decolonising Africa.

On the other, in the European space, concern for the direction in Portuguese political life focussed on the design of its domestic regime, while not ignoring its new foreign policy priorities, which were still being drawn up. The demands for a plural democracy and market economy were something both Portugal's European partners, individually, and the European Community as a whole systematically stressed during the Ongoing Revolutionary Process, an indication of their assessment of the risk in relation to developments in Portugal's political and military context.

This concern was not present over the whole period, but began in March 1975, with the effective departure of General Spínola, after he led an attempted coup (he had already resigned as president of the Republic in September 1974). This helped define the revolutionary process more clearly, showing the left-wing in the MFA to hold upper hand. In this sense, Willy Brandt, François Mitterrand and James Callaghan played an important role in trying to maintain close relations with Portuguese political and military leaders, especially thanks to their contacts with Mário Soares and Medeiros Ferreira through the cooperation between European socialist parties. This continued at least until normality was restored to political life, with the military manoeuvre that put an end to the Ongoing Revolutionary Process on 25 November 1975, and then from April 1976 onwards, with the approval of the Constitution of the Portuguese Democratic Republic and the first free elections for the Assembly of the Republic after the Constituent Assembly.



Signing of Portugal's Treaty of Accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in Lisbon on 12 June 1985. From left to right: Garret Fitzgerald (Prime Minister of Ireland), Mário Soares (Prime Minister of Portugal), Bettino Craxi (Prime Minister of Italy), Giulio Andreotti (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy) and Felipe González (Prime Minister of Spain). Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

In the case of the United States, the Nixon administration's easing of pressure in favour of decolonisation and their own domestic and international challenges (Watergate, Vietnam, detente) meant the country paid less attention to Portugal than might have been expected, in a context where such issues should have had a higher priority on their agenda. Nevertheless, they continued to follow events closely, especially after Frank Carlucci was appointed as the new ambassador to Lisbon.

Finally, the case of Spain deserves special mention due to the specific political dynamics in both states. The Franco dictatorship remained in place during the 25 April period and provided counter-revolutionary support in the following months. However, the Portuguese political situation was relatively well defined, as explained above, even before Spain started its transition to democracy. This meant that tensions among different parties (such as the far-right armed terrorist groups, Spínola's Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Portugal (MDLP) and the Portuguese Liberation Army (ELP), with arsenals of weapons and explosives near the border, and the protests outside the Spanish embassy in Lisbon that led to the recall of diplomats to Spain) never caused serious problems to long-term relations between the two states. [8]

Indeed, Spain ended up being the only case where a notable international impact from the

April Revolution can be detected. The Spanish fascist regime, fearful of similar political upheaval to 25 April, permitted timid openings for democracy and Spanish political actors followed the Portuguese political situation closely, identifying points of contact or rejection, allowing them to shape their own experience of democratic transition. [9]

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The international media at the time reflects the reality described above. Initially, the end of the dictatorship was enthusiastically received: it was celebrated with optimism regarding the future of the Portuguese Revolution, as seen in *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, which established parallels with the history of France. [10] Later, large numbers of foreign journalists and politicians arrived in Portugal to follow the developments in Portuguese politics. These professionals and their newspapers focussed their analysis on specific issues, such as the possible impact of the Portuguese Revolution on democratisation in other European states and the future of Portuguese citizens from the colonies in neighbouring countries, such as Rhodesia and South Africa. [11] They all observed and noted the changes in the course of the Ongoing Revolutionary Process. They grew disheartened over the future of liberal democracy and the weight of military and left-wing forces in determining the political developments, and then from 25 November 1975, they claimed that democratic normalisation was underway and relatively certain, so they switched their attention to other ongoing processes of democratic transition.

Portugal and the third wave of democratisation

In his influential work *The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century*, [12] Samuel P. Huntington states that there were three waves of increasingly intense democratisation. The first was from 1828 to 1926 and was immediately followed by a violent reaction with the rise of regimes such as Italian fascism and Nazism. The second, associated largely with the end of the Second World War, was from 1943 to 1962 and was also followed by a period of violent reaction between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s. And the third (without an end date at the time of Huntington's work) started in Portugal with the April Revolution and created a domino effect, especially in southern European states (Greece and Spain), Latin America and, later on, in the post-Cold War period, in Eastern Europe and other places.

This hypothesis assigns a central role to the April Revolution as the trigger for this third wave, although Huntington does not focus on the specifics differentiating it from the others, nor is he completely clear regarding the "beacon" effect of Portuguese democracy on the others. In other words, it is not clear whether the "domino effect" was a cause taken up by

the Portuguese Revolution, or how the Portuguese political process exerted direct pressure on the political situation in other states, hence the relationship between the different cases in this wave also remains unclear.

Indeed, several authors have criticised Huntington's proposal, as it fails to define or categorise the different political regimes as part of the same "wave" and what this might mean and entail. Firstly, it tells us very little about the dynamics leading to this process, both collectively and individually, and, secondly, to obliges us to assume an indeterminate external contextual force as a mechanical cause of the wave. In short, according to Huntington, this pressure, or context, is based on: domestic economic success and the oil crisis; the promotion of human rights by the USA and Gorbachev's reforms in the Soviet Union; the appeal of the European integration process; and a Catholic church more inclined to criticise dictatorships and promote democracy than in the past. However, this refers to the whole of the third wave of democratisation, but has little to do with the Portuguese case in particular. As Gunitsky points out

> "Huntington's definition focuses on the most visible element of waves: the temporal clustering of transitions. But in emphasizing on clustering, the definition leaves out another key element—the presence of linkages among the cases. A burst of similarly-timed transitions could happen for many reasons, such as parallel but independent development within states. Simultaneous transitions are thus not sufficient evidence of a wave unless there are demonstrable links among those transitions." [13]

Whatever the case, even authors who offer radically different and more nuanced theories, such as Gunitsky and his 13 waves of democracy, still consider Portugal as the initiator of the "wave of modernisation" (1974-1988), thus demonstrating the importance of the legacy of the April Revolution in its historical context. [14]

Instead of examining the Portuguese case from Huntington's point of view, which is more a descriptive history which does not problematise the issues in each case in the waves of democratisation, we may analyse it from Magen and Morlino's perspective, [15] which, focussing on the causes of democratisation processes, highlights the links between national and international elements.

> "In the contemporary international system nation-state regimes are subject to variably dense external (…) linkages, pressures and stimuli influencing internal conditions of democracy, yet democracy and processes of democratization exist solely within national systems, so that the proper level of analysis of democratization

> processes remain essentially domestic and the correct nexus of inquiry ought therefore to focus on identifying empirically discernible external-internal agency interaction.” [16]

Thus, the Portuguese case shows, even given the centrality of the colonial empire, that regime change is largely due to domestic factors [17] This does not ignore the possible impact of international relations on the political and military actors in the Revolution, such as Portuguese soldiers in NATO, international detente and international pressure from Portugal’s allies (the United States, the European states) in the context of the Ongoing Revolutionary Process, among other factors, but stresses that this impact (to a greater or lesser extent) was largely influential domestically. Indeed, according to these authors, the main elements of external influence on domestic democratic development are military control, conditionality (positive or negative), socialisation and emulation or example.



Homage monument to the Portuguese discoveries fallen to the ground, São Tomé e Príncipe, 1975. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

Some of these factors are readily identifiable in the Portuguese case: the presence in NATO itself and, in February 1975, the fact that the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga was anchored in Lisbon, practically in front of Belém Palace, the official residence of the president of the Portuguese Republic; the conditions attached to financial aid from the European partners and also the USA and the European Communities; and the socialisation of Portuguese

soldiers in NATO and also of Portuguese politicians, such as Mário Soares in particular, but also Sá Carneiro, especially in the context of the European families. Furthermore, in the context of the European integration process in its broadest sense, the role of emulation or example, provided by European states in particular, was influential throughout the process of designing the Portuguese political system and different areas of public policy.

> The Portuguese case shows that regime change is largely due to domestic factors. This does not ignore the possible impact of factors such as the international pressure from Portugal's allies

Therefore, although the academic literature on the April Revolution has tended to focus on the idea of waves of democratisation, and the third wave in particular, due to the role played by Portugal, its explanatory power is clearly very limited and insufficient. Thus, Magen and Morlino's work could provide an important source of explanation and causality in both history and political science research. It therefore merits closer attention in future research and might enormously enrich our current understanding of these events.

Conclusion

The importance of the international impact of the April Revolution is, initially, a difficult argument to establish. Portugal, a small, peripheral Western European state, had a military coup which brought the long fascist dictatorship to an end and started a revolutionary process that led to democracy, two processes that were so remarkable and significant that they had a major impact on the regional context and beyond.

Although there are few indications to confirm this latter point, the international impact of the Revolution is visible in a number of areas: the end of the Portuguese colonial war and the decolonisation of the former Portuguese African colonies; the deepening of relations between Portugal and the European Communities, ending in Portugal's membership; and its influence on the evolution of the political situation in Spain. However, one might note that, although it had an impact, it did not transform ongoing processes, not even in the context of the Cold War detente. Finally, we have attempted to show that there is room in the literature on democratisation to strengthen our knowledge of the April Revolution, with a better integration of the theoretical literature on transitions to democracy and the wealth of historical knowledge already produced on the Portuguese case, which we have briefly reviewed here.

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