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Portugal

# The Carnation Revolution of Portugal Today: The New Challenge from the Far-Right

- Features -

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**In an unmistakable style in the form of a provocative lecture in Lisbon in 2024, at the age of 84 Father Martins Júnior asked: “50 years later, what irony! There are 50 fascists, one for each year, in Parliament. How is this possible?” He made these remarks 50 years after the Carnation Revolution (25 April 1974). Father Martins Júnior was the parish priest of Machico on the island of Madeira, a Portuguese region that, until 1974, had a colonial regime in which the colonists had to give up half of the produce of their labour to the landlord. Father Martins Júnior led peasants to occupy land in 1975, and helped embroiderers build cooperatives to bypass capital exploitation. Father Martins Júnior’s activism demanded that labourers work to live instead of living to work. He leveraged his prominent voice and organizational skills to improve the plight of construction workers. With their resilience and determination, these workers improved their working conditions significantly.**

Under such collective actions, workers also gained Christmas bonuses, vacation pay, and free quality healthcare and education for the first time. The same applies to the bricklayers who defended Father Martins Júnior several times from police and a host of other attempts by the State’s repressive forces to stop him – as he liked to say – from being ‘on the side of the people’.

Many who actively participated in the Portuguese Carnation Revolution in 1974-75 are still alive, albeit now in their 70s and even 90s. The Revolution was a youthful political transformation led by a wave of proletarianization. Many young people entered the workforce in the 1960s, including many students who refused to fight in the colonial war from 1961-1974.

## Portugal Remains a Deeply Divided Society

Yet, despite those glorious transformations fifty years ago, Portugal remains a deeply divided society. On April 25, 2024, the 50th anniversary of the crucial coup d’état by the MFA (The Armed Forces Movement), 230 deputies of the Assembly of the Republic in Praça de São Bento in Lisbon celebrated it. Among those present were 50 fascists from the Chega Party and eight from the new far-right Liberal Initiative Party. The solemn session had the usual proceedings and guests, including the reception of foreign dignitaries and the presence of the MFA (Armed Forces Movement) that ended the colonial war.

It differed dramatically from what was transpiring not far away, less than 2 km from the Assembly of the Republic on Av. da Liberdade. A crowd of 600 thousand people, dominated by workers, families, and young people were mobilized. Rarely does a crowd that size gather in Portugal, not since the struggle against the EU-ledTroika demanding austerity (2012-2014) was such a multitude witnessed. They rallied to celebrate the ‘conquests of the Revolution’, the last genuinely socialist Revolution in 20th-century Europe. It was one of the largest popular demonstrations the country has seen in 50 years. The march lasted more than 7 hours between Praça Marquês de Pombal and Restauradores.

The inspection of these place names is not irrelevant. The juxtaposition of these two spaces, the one an official exclusive ceremony and the other of the multitude in the streets, signals a deep political polarization. The contrast reveals the social schism on display across European societies, if particularly in Portugal, where the cost of living is among the highest in Europe. According to official data, 47% of the Portuguese population are poor (before accounting for social transfers). The relationship between earned salary and the cost of living is one of the most

unbalanced in Europe. A house today costs 18 times more than it did in 1974. Housing prices have doubled in a decade, while wages (real and nominal) are falling as access to essential goods and services has deteriorated. In 2020, the national minimum wage was already only 68.4% of the average earnings of Portuguese workers. In 2023, 1 million people earned this salary of less than €800 net per month.

Portugal established the minimum wage in 1974 in the aftermath of the Revolution. At that time, minimum wage corresponded to workers' average expenses reflected in housing, clothing, food, etc. But today, it does not cover the bare minimum. More than half of the working population does not receive a minimum living wage (estimated at €1200 per month). In 2021, the average old-age pension was below the poverty line. In addition, the lack of a scientific and cultural infrastructure creates the conditions that leads thousands of professionals to emigrate. The socio-economic base fails to offer many workers the reasons – salary or otherwise – to stay in the country.

# Defending the Historical Memory of the Revolution in Portugal

Under these dire conditions, with living standards collapsing, right-wing forces aimed at disrupting the Carnation Revolution's historical memory and attempting to undermine its significance. In 2024, far-right political parties proposed and succeeded, for the first time, in establishing the celebration of the reactionary coup of 25 November 1975. The PS (Socialist Party) refused to celebrate the coup in 2024. The battle for memory is not just a battle for the past but a crucial struggle that shapes our future, carrying the weight of our history and the lessons we must learn from it.

Therefore, recounting the November 1975 counter-revolutionary coup is essential. The right-wing coup d'état was militarily led by Ramalho Eanes and civilly led by the Socialist Party, with the support of the traditional right, the Catholic Church, NATO, and the 'Group of Nine' (a social-reformist wing of the MFA). More than 100 revolutionary officers were arrested. These officers were leaders of soldiers of revolutionary units organized under experimental power-sharing methods. The soldiers of these units were then demoted and relegated to the reserves.

The radicalized platoons started to emulate worker's councils that arose spontaneously in neighbourhoods and workplaces as workers purged collaborators of the old fascist regime of postwar Portugal. Thousands of people took part in self-managing workplaces and communities; such organizations were an affront to the usual centralized bureaucracy of the state.

The dual power-sharing system set up by workers at local levels existed parallel to the traditional government institutions. It challenged not only the 'recognized' provisional governments at the time but also 'official' labour unions and political parties typically claiming to represent workers, such as the Socialist Party and even the Communist Party. Soldiers' bottom-up and grassroots organizing was an existential threat to many in conventional corridors of the state and capitalist power. The November 25th reactionary coup restored so-called 'discipline' in the armed forces. It ended the alleged 'Sovietization' – a term used to describe the perceived influence of Soviet-style communism – in the words of Mário Soares (leader of the Socialist Party) himself – of the barracks.

## The Counter-Revolutionary Coup

The publicly proclaimed reason for such a reactionary undertaking was to 'stabilize' institutions. However, the fundamental objective of the November 25th coup plotters was to restore the centrality of the Portuguese State in a

liberal democratic capitalism. This would inevitably take the form of a politically liberal system with all its trimmings, such as universal suffrage, an elected parliament, a new constitution with rights and freedoms guarantees, and the nominal introduction of the rule of law. Mário Soares led this 'democratic counter-revolution' on November 25, 1975. (Thankfully, very few deaths occurred.)

One could claim it was, in fact, something like a 'technical draw' between labour and the bourgeoisie. Organized workers were finally defeated politically, but the bourgeoisie was forced to make broad concessions resembling those in France and Britain in the construction of the postwar period. These included significant concessions, such as forming a welfare state and the right to secure – even full – employment.

The PCP (Portugal Communist Party), in turn, agreed not to resist. (Or did it pre-negotiate? It is yet to be thoroughly investigated.) The PCP, on November 25, publicly assumed, through its then leader, Álvaro Cunhal, that the remaining radical soldiers were a burden to PCP's objectives. The reasoning was that these 'rebel and militant' soldiers were jeopardizing the delicate balance of power – a 'stable equilibrium' between the US-backed group of Nine and the larger geopolitical agreements of 'peaceful coexistence' between a US-led Western Europe and North American bloc, and its rivals in the east comprised of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc (a division formed in the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences of 1945).

The resolution ended not with a fascist putsch, as in General Pinochet's Chile of 1973, but with a new type of civil-military coup, with little violence and little resistance. Popular power based on the duality of shared power and participatory democracy was rooted out. The revolutionary groups that aspired to popular power during the Carnation Revolution had no general coordination, nothing remotely similar to a centralized political party like the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917. Despite this, now and again some make the erroneous claims that Bolshevik-style factions were underhandedly attempting to steer the Revolution's outcomes. But nothing remotely similar existed in Portugal in 1975 that would allow such factions to play such a crucial role.

Although important, the Carnation Revolution had little effect on the dominant European powers of Germany, the UK, and France. But it significantly impacted the Mediterranean periphery including Spain and Greece. The ambivalence of the November 25 counter-revolutionary coup of 1975 meant that it never had official celebrations in Portugal until recently (2024). The worldwide strength of the far-right finally infiltrated Portugal, and the rise of neo-fascist political parties opened up space for the awkward celebration of the November 25 coup. It is a coup that is, oddly enough, not even recognized as such by those who support it. They spin fanciful tales claiming that paratroopers attempted a coup and, therefore, provoked a justification for their right-wing insurgence and takeover on November 25.

The ruling elites saw the whole endeavour as a 'necessity' for 'normalization' to end the 'Sovietization' of the armed forces and other spheres of life. It was a 'necessity' even for the PCP, which changed only its position on the matter after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although difficult to believe, the PCP also accepted the November 25 coup of 1975 as a 'necessity'; the coup effectively halted and countered the political left-wing of the military, which was only partially controlled by the PCP. Thus, critical decision-makers within the PCP were relieved that the November 25 1975 coup was successful.

The PS offered a 'third way', known as the 'Scandinavian' way, epitomized in Northern European nations. According to the PS leadership, this third way was a model for rejecting both a dictatorial Stalinist USSR and hegemonic North American imperialism.

These narratives failed in two ways. First, the PCP never really wanted to make a revolution in Portugal (only in Angola), and its aim of 'Europe with us' never happened. In other words, the PCP was hopelessly eager to be accepted as a legitimate political entity within the US and NATO-led European political theatre. It was delusional in prostrating itself before European powers for acceptance and hoping to have a seat at the table.

Secondly, the socialist democracy the PS dreamed of as a bulwark against the Soviet system and US imperialism ultimately collapsed as Socialist Parties throughout the West capitulated to American capital as the Soviet Union crumbled. Today, Portugal is still one of the poorest countries in Western Europe. After a few years of relief following the Revolution, Mario Soares consistently opposed German ordo-neoliberalism (a form of economic austerity) until the end of his life, but to no avail. Pizarro Correia and others in the military who had participated in the November 25th coup examined the vile effects of austerity policies from the Cavaco Silva regime onwards, wondering whether the reactionary counter-revolutionary coup of November 25 was worth it.

## The New Far Right in Portugal

The celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution, unsurprisingly, are not unanimously praised. Deputies, cadres, and votes from the traditional right-wing and Christian-democratic parties (the PSD and the CDS in a revamping of their so-called 'Democratic Alliance') migrated to the new Chega Party, which has elements of neo-fascism in its political base. This flow to the new Chega Party caused the CDS to implode politically and made it difficult for a liberal wing of the PSD – from which its prominent leader derives – to survive the neo-fascist drift within its ranks.

The old and new right-wing parties are amalgamating into a neoliberal and hyper-conservative 'pleiad' (social notables) that comprises neo-Christian fundamentalists, including Fatimists (a Catholic religious faction). The new desire to celebrate November 25 emerges from here. The latest extreme on the right is embodied in the anti-communism of IL (the Liberal Initiative) and the neo-fascism of Chega. The media normalizes it all as milquetoast 'liberals' rather than what they are – figures of the 'radical / extreme right'. These groupings want to celebrate November 25 for what it was: a coup d'état against democracy at work, against the duality of popular power. In short, they want to celebrate the counter-revolution, the beginning of the end of the Revolution.

November 25 heralded Portugal's reconstruction from a 'national capitalism' dependent on forced labour in its African colonies until 1974 to a subservient capitalism that is a de facto protectorate of the leading European power of Germany, France, and Britain. Portugal now helplessly depends on investments and capital goods from North America, Spain, China, and other countries.

The ostensible 'democratic counter-revolution' of 25 November 1975 is a central political event for understanding what happened in Portugal, and it was far less democratic and far more reactionary in its roots. As we rescue the authentic memory of the Carnation Revolution and lament its demise, no wonder Father Martins Júnior said in a piercing manner that what remains is "50 neo-fascists in the hemicycle 50 years after the April Revolution."

The impossible became possible on that day 50 years ago. The dreams unleashed on April 25, 1974, neither have been vanquished nor fulfilled. The slogan could not be more urgent: April 25 forever, fascism never again!

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Source [Socialist Project](#).

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