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Portugal

# **Building an anti-liberal left in Portugal is difficult but necessary**

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**Portugal is experiencing a significant shift to the right, particularly visible in the results of the last parliamentary elections. These difficulties are caused by the effects of the global crisis on the country. Jorge Costa has been a leader of the Portuguese Left Bloc ( Bloco de Esquerda ) since its formation in 1999, including as a Member of Parliament in 2009-2011 and 2015-2019. He gives his analysis of this shift.**

## **How do you analyse the results of the last elections?**

The most important change that occurred on May 18 was the advance of the Chega party [\[1\]](#), which has become the second largest party in the country. with 60 MPs, two more than the Socialist Party. In the new parliamentary composition, none of the three largest parties (right: PSD+CDS, 31 per cent; far right: CH, 23 per cent, Socialist Party, 23 per cent) is in a position to form a majority by allying with smaller parties. The lifespan of the right-wing government will therefore depend on the support for the principal laws proposed – starting with the state budget – by the CH or the PS. No post-election agreement has been reached so far.

Unlike the situation before May, the possibility of parliamentary agreements with the CH is now openly admitted by the PSD. The parliamentary framework thus becomes very permeable to conflicts and social tensions, including those created around "perceptions" to instil hate speech on security and immigration.

On the other hand, for the first time, the MPs to the right of the Socialist Party represent more than two-thirds of the elected representatives the threshold necessary to amend the Constitution. This introduces a real risk of a regressive modification of the constitutional regime, a long-standing ambition of the right. The ultra-liberals of the Liberal Initiative (IL) (5 per cent) and the CH have already announced their support for this possible revision.

The Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) achieved the worst electoral result in its history (2 per cent) and has only one MP left (the party coordinator, Mariana Mortágua), behind Livre (European Greens) (4 per cent) and the PCP (Communist Party, 3 per cent) . It should be remembered that between 2015 and 2022, the Bloco obtained 10 per cent of the votes and 19 MPs, becoming the largest party in a political field that totalled 20% of the votes: the Bloco , the PCP, Livre and the PAN (animalists). Today, all of these parties together only obtain half of the votes obtained at that time, and a third of the MPs.

## **What does the rise of the far right, which is the big news, reveal about the context and the history of Portugal?**

The far-right's result demonstrates its ability to retain the abstentionist vote it had obtained in 2024, and to increase it throughout the country, particularly in the most socially disadvantaged areas, in the provinces and in the former industrial belts. The CH becomes the leading party in the districts south of the Tagus (Setúbal, Portalegre, Beja, Faro – which were formerly strongholds of the PCP and the PS). The CH is in a position to seek government office. This new situation will result in a general deterioration in the conditions for exercising democracy, both in parliament – where the CH has been pursuing a strategy of exhausting the conditions for debate and expression for several years

– and in society, with the trivialization of racist and fascist violence.

The centrality given to the political debate on the issue of immigration was a significant factor in the defeat of the left. Portugal has undergone one of the most profound transformations in its social composition and the profile of the working class. In just a few years, the number of foreign workers has increased tenfold and now represents approximately one-third of the workforce. A significant portion of this new working class does not come from Portuguese-speaking countries. The far-right's narrative has been reinforced by the failure of reception and regularization services and by reduced investment in comprehensive responses to housing, public services, and language access. The government has used its own version of security-related and xenophobic rhetoric to justify the new anti-immigrant legislation, aided by the Socialist Party's retreat on this issue. This narrative has been popularized by the sensationalism of certain media outlets and, above all, by the manipulation of the masses through social media. In fact, the far right has succeeded in making immigration the most widely accepted explanation for the difficulties in people's lives.

Anti-racist and anti-fascist action, the creation of common and united spaces, and the expression of a programme of social transformation in working-class areas where authoritarianism and hate speech are now rooted continue to play a central role. It is crucial to find ways to open trade unions to foreign workers, to create mechanisms for inclusion, and to prevent the exploitation of differences in order to promote social resentment and division within the working class.

## How do you see the future of discussions within the ruling class and the possibilities for the development of this extreme right?

Montenegro [\[2\]](#) sees in the current parliamentary relationship of forces the opportunity to relaunch, with the support of the CH and the IL, a counter-reform of labour law – left pending with the fall of the government of the troika in 2015. [\[3\]](#) – and thus remove the little protection that remains for workers and introduce restrictions on the right to strike and deregulation of working hours. This is a war against labour and the collective organization of workers.

After a first year of government interrupted by the elections, the right is making speeches and legislating to compete with CH on its own ground, that of xenophobia, and seems to want to deepen its radicalization to the right – in its discourse, in the government structure, in the composition of the government, in its programme (largely hidden by the AD during the electoral campaign: revision of labour laws and the right to strike, anticipation of the objective of defence spending, anti-immigrant legislation). To the point that the new leader of the PS, José Luís Carneiro, now puts in question an agreement on government with the PSD, initially proposed by the socialists.

In its hesitations, the Portuguese political centre is following the European model in its decomposition: liberal capitulation, worsening inequalities and social resentment, adherence to xenophobic and security-oriented common sense that confirms the theses of the extreme right. The parties to the left of the PS must recognize the historic change represented by the current position of the CH and prevent the political struggle from being reduced to the dialectic between ascendant neo-fascism and the liberal centre in crisis.

## The result is difficult for the Bloco. How do you analyse this decline, while the PS is declining less?

Between 2015 and 2022, the Bloco was the largest party in a political arena that totalled 20 per cent of the vote. Taking this diversity into account, it supported proposals and put forward alternatives for social progress and climate justice, with the potential to assert itself as an autonomous political field. Four years after the "geringonça" agreements [4], these parties maintained their 20 per cent vote share, benefiting from their ability to guarantee, between 2015 and 2019, political stability based on a (modest but real) redistribution of wealth: cancellation of budget cuts and taxes, increase in the minimum wage, transport tickets, school textbooks, end of health access fees. During this period, the PS carried out serious attacks on public services, but Passos Coelho's liberal plan (starting with the privatization of social security) was blocked by the solidity of the left. A political and class revenge then remained to be accomplished.

When the international context (Covid, inflation, war) increased pressure on wages, housing, and public services (especially healthcare)—and despite some easing of pressure from the EU and the minority on the right—the PS refused any reform, preferring to call elections to relieve pressure from the parties to its left, on which it depended in parliament. Without coordinated action to reject stagnant budgets, parties to the left of the PS became more vulnerable to the hostile tactics of then-Prime Minister António Costa, who blamed them for the political crisis. They lost part of their representation in 2022, when the PS obtained a short-lived absolute majority, and again in 2024, after it imploded in a cloud of corruption.

In this new political context, the Bloco revised its electoral campaign model. We have not abandoned the programmatic battles that define the Bloc's identity, such as public services, equality, the rejection of xenophobia, and opposition to militarism, but we have focused on a few salient issues: rent caps, workers' rights, and the wealth tax. This is also how we have avoided a sterile discussion on governability, highlighting measures that would change the lives of a significant portion of the population and that our parliamentary representation would defend under all circumstances. This policy has borne fruit: the issue of rent caps has occupied an important place in the political debate, forced all our opponents to speak out,. It has been reinforced by the increasingly alarming news about the housing crisis, and has been identified by a portion of the population as a valid response. It will remain one of the most important battles for the lives of our people. However, none of our proposals promoted an electoral revival.

Our campaign promoted decentralized, direct-contact initiatives, with door-to-door canvassing. We visited more than 20,000 homes and launched a form of political action that will be fundamental in the future. We did this in a variety of ways across the country, mobilizing young activists, recent members, and older ones, who were able to see that they could intervene directly and not as spectators of the electoral campaign. For the same reason, we replaced traditional gatherings with "coffee chats," open to dialogue with everyone, and with creative and lively parties and public sessions.

The Bloco will not stop fighting for what we defended in these elections: a popular housing policy, workers' rights, the fight against inequality and for the quality and guarantee of public services, against fascist threats and for unity in the defence of democratic life and the constitutional rules that protect it.

**Does this call into question the political orientation and usefulness of the Bloco? Or does it, on the contrary, confirm the need for such an organization in the political decline we are experiencing on a global scale?**

In this new phase, convergence to the left of the Socialist Party is a sine qua non for achieving democratic victory against the radicalized right. Isolated, none of the left-wing forces will be sufficient to confront this rise of the right. All political forces, social and trade union activists in this political field are called upon to form a camp that serves as a

transformative reference, in opposition to the right-wing governance supported by the centre, embodied by the Socialist Party.

This path of rapprochement and convergence is difficult, but it is the Bloco's path. It must find an electoral expression and must build common spaces and social experience, without abandoning any flag – from union struggles to the student movement, from feminism to LGBTQI+ rights, from fraternity with immigrants to anti-militarism.

There are certainly strong differences in this area: Livre aligns itself with an uncritical Europeanism and has strong ambiguities on arms issues. On the PCP side, in addition to the misreadings resulting from unbridled "campism," there is a sectarianism that is strengthening as the party's influence declines. The trade union movement is paying a high price, with the sectarian atrophy of the CGTP unions, already threatened by society's rightward drift. However, there are recent experiences of truly united mobilizations that open up perspectives: in the suburbs of the capital, in the struggles for the right to housing, against racism, and in response to police violence and fascist gangs. In the heat of these struggles and in the opening of these spaces, solidarities must be forged that reveal the contours of a transformative alternative capable of confronting and overcoming the expressions of hatred that are being mobilized. The role of the Left Bloc is irreplaceable in all these debates and processes of struggle.

## How do you see the social in Portugal this autumn?

As in many countries, public opinion is sensitive to the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The participation of Bloco MP Mariana Mortágua in the Gaza Flotilla initiative demonstrates our commitment to the Palestinian cause and echoes a sense of solidarity that is spreading throughout the country.

At the same time, at the union level, there will be an important debate on how to respond to the government's employment package, which, in addition to reversing all the small gains made under the Socialist Party governments, also includes new attacks. The need for convergent action between the Communist and Socialist trade unions (CGTP and UGT, respectively) is the subject of an ongoing debate with a view to calling a general strike. At the same time, the government's defeat before the Constitutional Court on key aspects of its anti-immigration law (for example, obstacles to family reunification) has given new impetus to immigrant movements for mobilizations in September, which must be linked to union struggles.

Electorally, the next challenge is the municipal elections of October 12, in which the far right aims to conquer several town halls, including some of the largest in the country (Sintra, near Lisbon, for example). The Communist Party will have great difficulty in retaining the few local governments it still controls, but it has refused any dialogue with other left-wing parties. The Bloco is running in the municipal elections in quite a few towns and cities, including as part of coalitions with Livre in more than twenty large municipalities. In Lisbon and Ponta Delgada (capital of the Azores region), the Bloco is participating in coalitions extended to the Socialist Party in order to defeat the right-wing mayors.

The presidential election will take place in January 2026. The president is a secondary figure in the constitutional regime, with limited intervention in the legislative process, although with the power to dissolve parliament. On both the right and the left, the scenario is one of political fragmentation, with each party seeking its own candidate, making the future outcome difficult to predict. It is likely that the former Bloco coordinator, Catarina Martins, will be the Bloco-backed candidate. [\[5\]](#)

3 September 2025

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[1] The far-right Chega party (CH), which in Portuguese means "Enough," which did not exist in the 2015 elections, obtained 1.3 per cent of the vote in 2019, 7.2 per cent in 2022 and 18.1 per cent in 2024.

[2] Luis Montenegro , leader of the PSD, had been the head of the previous government since April 2024. Accused of favouring the Spinunviva company , which he founded and which is run by his wife, the opposition refused to vote confidence in the government. The President of Portugal then dissolved parliament and called early elections for May 2025. Following the relative victory of AD (Democratic Alliance), formed by the PSD and the CDS, Montenegro is once again tasked with forming a government.

[3] The troika was the name given to the government led by PSD leader Passos Coelho from 2011 to 2015, with the open support of the IMF and the European Central Bank

[4] The policy of critical and conditional support for the PS government from 2015 to 2019 in exchange for the PS accepting a series of progressive measures proposed by the radical left, became known as the “geringonça”, which can be translated as “contraption.”

[5] The Bloc will hold its next congress in November, where it will continue to discuss the situation, the results of the elections, and its orientation.