

Portugal: high instability and a shift to the right

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Der Vorsitzende der Koalition der Demokratischen Allianz (AD) Luis Montenegro bei seiner Siegesrede während der Wahlnacht am 10. März 2024, Lissabon.

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While the votes are still being counted (four MPs representing the Portuguese communities abroad are still to be elected), and after a night of volatile emotions, the main right-wing coalition, the Democratic Alliance (AD, formed by the main right-wing party, the PSD, and a smaller partner, the CDS), defeated the ruling Socialist Party (PS) by a narrow margin of 51,000 votes and just two seats in parliament. After eight years in power, the centre-right PS lost half a million votes (from 41.4% to 28.7%) and conceded defeat. Even if the four MPs still to be elected were all PS, it would be a very narrow victory given the country's shift to the right. The traditional and conservative right, the liberals and the far right hold 135 of the 230 seats in parliament. The far right, on the other hand, increased its share of seats from 12 to 46 (from 7.2% to 18%). For the left, the results are contradictory: the Communist Party (PCP, running in elections as the CDU) lost two of its six seats (from 4.3% to 3.3%), the Left Bloc slightly increased its vote (from 4.4% to 4.5%) and its five MPs were re-elected, and a centre-left formation, Livre, increased its representation from 1 to 4 seats. Overall, the centre and

the left won 40% of the vote, one of the lowest results for many years, and the right and the far right won 60%, with the latter coming in strong. This article aims at giving a brief overview of these results and their history.

The PS defeat and the social crisis

To make a long story short, the Socialist Party had been in government since 2015. At the time, Portugal was emerging from a devastating austerity plan imposed by the troika (ECB, IMF and European Commission) after the 2011 debt crisis. Wages and pensions had been slashed, unemployment had risen, social protection for the unemployed had been cut and other social rights were at stake, such as access to abortion, which had been made more difficult. Despite huge popular opposition to these poverty-increasing measures, a right-wing coalition won more votes and seats than the PS in 2015. However, it lost its control over parliament as a new majority formed on the left. As a result, the PS was forced to accept a raft of anti-austerity measures imposed by the left (the Left Bloc and the PCP) as a condition for forming a government with a parliamentary majority. For the next four years (2015-2019), this majority was called "geringonça", a Portuguese word used to describe an unusual contraption that, despite its complicated mechanisms, somehow still works.

Initially used as an insult to ridicule this strange kind of entente, the "geringonça" was able to rise much hope and implement effective social measures. Wages and pensions were increased, the minimum wage was raised (facing fierce opposition from the European Commission), privatization was halted, the cost of public transport and education reduced and access to energy for people on low incomes was improved, among other achievements. Despite the success of the "geringonça", by the end of its term in 2019, the PS was looking to sidestep the conditions imposed by the left. Despite falling short of an absolute majority, it rejected a new post-electoral agreement. Over the next two years, António Costa's government concentrated on fostering a political crisis in the hope of provoking new elections. This led to snap elections in January 2022, in which the PS finally achieved its goal of an absolute majority, defeating the Left Bloc and the PCP. This time the PS gained 120 elected MPs and 41.4% of the popular vote, while the main right-wing party only managed 27.7% and 72 MPs.

In spite of this victory, or perhaps because of it, new difficulties arose for the government. Over its short term of less than two years, the new Costa government suffered successive scandals, seeing ministers quitting on an almost monthly basis, and finally chose to call it a day on the back of a new, and possibly irrelevant, legal case. As a consequence, new elections were called and the PS chose Pedro Nuno Santos, an ex-minister and one of Costa's internal opponents to take over as general secretary.

Although the political crisis was foreseeable, the main difficulties and challenges of this period of the PS government, especially during the two years of its absolute majority, have been caused by its failure to address some of the main social problems, in some cases worsening them. A public education system weakened by the inability to recruit new teachers as the previous generation retires and a public health sector counting more than 1.5 million people without a family doctor and confronted with a shortage of doctors and nurses leading to hospital care crisis and the housing crisis are the main examples. Housing became one of the key issues in the

electoral debate, with the Left Bloc accusing the PS government of favoring successive price rises: Rents in Lisbon are higher than in Madrid or Paris, and house prices are the third highest in the world in relation to average incomes. This is the consequence of an economic strategy based on tourism, which not only keeps the wages and qualifications of those working in the sector low, but also attracts rich foreign buyers, supported by generous and specific tax breaks. This drives up prices to levels that are unaffordable for the local population. As a result of this strategy, in the centre of Lisbon, for example, Airbnb and similar accommodations outnumber local residents. This so-called Disneyfication of urban areas led to a generational exodus. As these problems have grown, social protests have increased, with large demonstrations demanding, in particular, a public housing plan, an end to tax breaks, and controls on prices and interest rates for people in debt. The defeat of the PS, which lost half a million votes, is closely linked to these social issues and the backlash against them.

Changes in the right-wing landscape

As noted above, the main right-wing coalition AD, won by a very narrow margin. Despite a high turnout (the lowest abstention rate since 1995), the PS lost only by two seats (although four are still to be counted). The AD might be able to form a parliamentary or government alliance with the Liberals (who have 5.1% and eight MPs), but will still be far from a parliamentary majority. As a result, the government will be unstable and there is no certainty that its budget will be passed next autumn. In fact, the government will be left in the position of an electoral committee preparing new early elections, as this instability generates short political cycles without a clear leadership.

The main reason for the right's failure to form a stable government after the collapse of the previous PS government is the rise of the far-right party Chega. During the election campaign, the leader of the AD and incoming Prime Minister Luis Montenegro made clear, that he would not negotiate with Chega, leaving him no room for manoeuvre to guarantee that the budget would be approved.

Chega is led by André Ventura, a former member of the leadership of the right-wing PSD, who a few years ago, riding the Trump and Bolsonaro wave and as a well-known TV football pundit, decided to explore the far-right niche. In the past, this wing of the right was seen as a xenophobic conservative party, but when it entered government and adopted pro-European Union positions, it was integrated into the more mainstream landscape and never developed the poisonous and violent rhetoric of others. Now Chega can be compared to Salvini, Le Pen and Abascal. It is directly supported by the Bolsonaro family and Likud representatives attend its conferences. According to a poll, Chega won a large part of the youth's vote, was the favourite candidate of the 35-54 age group and counts 60.5% of male voters.

If there still exists a latent culture and a group of apologists of the Portuguese dictatorship - defeated 50 years ago by the popular and military revolution of 25 April 1974 - they have now all reappeared as Chega supporters. But this is not enough to explain how the party won 18% and more than a million votes. This was driven by a variety of factors. These include the belief in the anti-corruption narrative which the party uses as its main talking point, and social resentments, instrumentalized by a fear-mongering that blames people living in absolute poverty for more generalized economic difficulties.

Has Chega reached its peak with these excellent election results? It is difficult to say and will depend on the evolution of the right and the left's capacity for social mobilization. In any case, AD made it clear during the campaign that it would not partner with the extreme right. Montenegro is now trying to blackmail Chega by demanding unconditional support in parliament and blaming his challenger, Ventura, for the potential formation of an alternative left-wing government if he does not vote for the AD's main legislative proposals. There will be a fierce battle for supremacy between the right and the far-right wings of parliament, and the outcome is difficult to predict.

What is very clear, however, is that sections of the business class are now funding and supporting the extreme right, in some cases hoping for preferential treatment in privatization processes and other forms of political protection. Their fear of a left-wing victory was clearly demonstrated by an aggressive smear campaign against Mariana Mortágua, the leader of the Left Bloc. They were afraid of the future influence she might have in defining fair tax policies on wealth and inheritance, as she had previously succeeded in introducing what is popularly known as the "Mortágua tax" on millionaires' houses. The funding and support of the extreme right has become a tool used by the elite to protect their economic and political interests. In this election, fear and hatred towards the left has been expressed through online smear campaigns which were ramped up to an unprecedented level. Mariana, incidentally, beat Ventura decisively in their TV debate two weeks before the election.

Setbacks for the centre and left

A final note on the setbacks for the centre and the left. The party of the centre, the PS, has paid a heavy price for its last two years in government, and has indeed damaged its credibility as a political alternative. Its absolute control of parliament 2022-2024 meant that it depended on no one but itself, and the successive scandals, as well as the social problems it created or exacerbated, led to the loss of some of its support. Nevertheless, the PS retained a large proportion of the votes of older people, who fear more of the pension cuts imposed right-wing governments imposed in the past.

The Left Bloc ran an energetic campaign led by its new coordinator, Mortágua, who had recently replaced Catarina Martins as party leader. With a slight increase in votes and margins (almost 34,000 more votes, from 4.4% to 4.5%), the Bloc re-elected its five MPs and secured its status as the leading left-wing party. Its main issues were a housing plan, fair taxes, rebuilding the national health and education systems, gender equality and a concrete plan to foster environmental policies and the energy transition. Its social support came mainly from women of all ages (who accounted for 62% of its vote) and people in their thirties and forties, mostly with a secondary or university education, as well as people working in precarious jobs. Among the over-65s, the Bloc received only 12% of the vote.

The Communist Party (PCP, standing as CDU), also led by a new general secretary (Paulo Raimundo, who recently replaced Jerónimo de Sousa), lost two seats in its traditional strongholds of Setúbal and Alentejo, and although it has defied predictions of its demise, it suffered losses across the country. It has more male than female supporters, along with older people. As the PCP is closely linked to the main trade union, its campaign focused on labour issues. On the part of the Left Bloc, it indicated that it would negotiate an agreement for a new government with the PS, provided that some essential social measures were part of the agreement.

As mentioned above, a centre-left party, Livre, affiliated to the European Greens, jumped from one to four MPs, the same number as the PCP. In many European countries, the Greens are currently a fluctuating constellation of pro-market parties allied in government with social democrats and liberals (Germany) or with other right-wing parties in other countries. Livre itself has tried to reach an agreement with the PS, to which it is close, and has not rejected some form of compromise with the right.

In the immediate future, all these parties will be part of the parliamentary and social opposition. The demonstrations for the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution will be the occasion for them to come together and will be a symbolic call for resistance and the rebuilding of a left wing capable of fighting for the present and future of the people. In this unstable political situation, facing new crises and possible elections, the goals of defeating the extreme right and mobilizing popular forces to win a new majority are important challenges for the left. If past mistakes tell us anything, it is that the left must address the concerns of all people, independently of their gender, young and old, unemployed and migrants, professionals and workers, taxpayers and those in debt to the banks, and fight for the anti-capitalist agenda of social respect, equality and freedom.

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Quelle: <https://www.rosalux-europa.info/en/article/2353.portugal-high-instability-and-a-shift-to-the-right.html>