

Anti-Revisionism in Portugal

A Note on April 25, 1974

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It began with a military coup in 1926 and ended with the military coup of April 1974. Portugal's 'Carnation Revolution' quickly toppled the authoritarian Estado Novo, and until the failed revolt led by extreme-left sectors of the army in November 1975, "all the pre-existing relationships involving authority and discipline were questioned".

The complexities of the period are insufficiently explored here, and chronological narratives are available elsewhere for Portuguese society lived in 1974-1975 a period of exacerbated political agitation and of predominance of ideological discourse. Miguel Cardinal describes its effect:

"The social mobilization that followed dismantled the repressive apparatus of the dictatorship, questioned the structure of ownership, experimented with new forms of organization and claims, won back public freedoms that had been curtailed, and witnessed the independence of the African territories, the end of the war, and the downfall of the Portuguese Empire in Africa." [Territorializing Maoism]

The dictatorship collapsed after a few hours, almost without a fight, brought down by a military coup organized by young, middle-rank

officers of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), who desired to put an end to the war in Africa. A National Salvation Junta, presided over by the General Antonio de Spínola who, in May of that year, was to become the president of the Portuguese Republic. In April 1975 the Portuguese people voted for the Constituent Assembly. A year later they elected an Assembly of the Republic. In June 1976 a President was elected: Eanes, the law-and-order candidate, campaigning against "states within the state", polled over 60% of the vote.

A turbulent transition from coup to a resurgence of a genuine struggle for control of the revolution. The coup in Portugal occurred within seven months of the bloody overthrow of the Popular Unity government in Chile, and inevitably the Left in Lisbon looked nervously to the "lessons" of Chile so that they might avoid a similar fate. The next 13 months were punctured by the failure of the coup d'état staged by the right-wing forces on 11 March 1975, the fall of the fifth Provisional Government by the end of August 1975 and the ultra-left-wing military coup on 25 November 1975 failed, and the ascendancy of social democrats and centrists' politicians emerged.

In the least developed country in Europe, characterised by a large peasantry in the North, landed estates in the south, and concentrated industrial centres around Lisbon and in the Porto region, rebellion broke out. In this catholic dominated society clinging to imperial colonial empire challenged by the national liberation struggles in Angola, Guinea (PAIGC) and Mozambique (FRELIMO), from the draining failure of colonial war emerged in September 1973 the Movimento das Forças Armadas, MFA.

Following April 1974, the largest party on the left the PCP fostered relationships with MFA and had three members in the First provisional Government – it chimed with the all class alliance the PCP thought strategically necessary. However it was short lived, it fell on July 9th 1974 partly because the use of the military to discipline striking industrial workers. The Second Provisional Government created COPCON (Continental Operations and Command) as a

reliable internal state security forces separate from the existing armed forces structure.

There were illusions about the MFA an instrument of social change; The PCP did all in its power to boost the MFA as a "guarantor of democracy". The most-pro-Soviet party in Europe, the PCP, when faced with the collapse of the dictatorship in 1974, and the choice of a parliamentary or a revolutionary route to socialism and opted for the latter; they were the first communists to participate in a West European government coalition since the 1940s. However ultimately the PCP was eclipsed by a resurgent social-democratic force led by Mario Soares (1924-2017).

Long-time anti-revisionist critic, F M Rodrigues writing in 2005 would still argue that

“The central feature of Portuguese revisionism has always been this effort to convince the proletariat to accept the petty (and the average!) Bourgeoisie as an ally of the revolution. First with the argument that all “honorable Portuguese” wanted the end of fascism (which was not true); now with the argument that all Democrats want the end of homeless monopolists (which is equally false). That is why we say that the PCP's love for the proletariat aims to put it at the service of the petty bourgeoisie. Anyone who has not understood this may be a Democrat, a trade unionist, an anti-imperialist, but he is certainly not a Marxist.” [Labor Policy No. 102, Nov-Dec 2005]

When the MFA mutinied in April 1974 it sought a social base to legitimise its position. Most of those who made the coup d'etat of April 25, 1974, had modest aims--their intention being more to bring Portugal into line with mainstream Western Europe than to make a revolution. Yet a revolution of sorts was nevertheless what Portugal experienced. A major restructuring of government and society occurred, a set of values questioned in the aftermath of the regime change; popular energy and social forces that had been building in

resistance in the late 60s/early 70s were unleashed. The clandestine existence of political forces were no more, social activism no longer circumspect and stamped upon – there were occupation of housing projects, strikes for wage increases, strikes for the purging of fascist collaborators, state nationalisation of banks, great landed estates of southern Portugal were expropriated, open organisations for any demand, workers' commissions CTs galore, the emergence of mass meetings and popular debate.

Mass struggles were not documented, minuted and preserved. There was a renaissance of thought and actions taken in those chaotic halcyon days when Europe's longest standing dictatorship disintegrated, with the toppling of the Estado Novo nothing was settled. As the forces of revolutionary change emerged, so did those of counter-revolution. That process, beyond the scope of this introduction, is explored elsewhere. Only a narrowly prescriptive Eurocentric analysis would suggest that the 1974 military led putsch would qualify as "the final left wing revolution of the twentieth century". It was the questioning and activism that occurred in Portugal during 1974-75 that gave the radical democratic character of the mass struggles eventually neutralised by the holding of elections and the enactment of a new constitution during the first half of 1976 established a western style one-party wins parliamentary system. The focus here remains on the evolution of one tendency in that resistance to the repression of Portuguese fascism, and the contest for the future.