OPINION POLITICS & IDEAS

The Populist Right Rises in Portugal

The Chega party is growing fast in a country where the center long held.

By William A. Galston Follow

June 4, 2024 12:29 pm ET

A red carnation and the Portuguese flag in Lisbon, April 25. PHOTO: PATRICIA DE MELO MOREIRA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Estoril, Portugal

Portugal is a small country with an outsize influence on modern politics. The 1974 Carnation Revolution against longtime dictator António Salazar culminated in pro-democratic forces' victory over both fascism and communism. It ushered in what political scientist Samuel Huntington called democracy's third wave, when dozens of countries made the transition to self-government between the mid-1970s and early 2000s.

At a conference I attended this week, Carl Gershman, founding president of the National Endowment for Democracy, delivered a stirring tribute to the revolutionary Mário Soares, who braved torture and exile to help establish

democracy in Portugal and subsequently became prime minister and president. When Portuguese communists sought to replace Salazar's fascism with a Stalinist regime, Mr. Gershman recounted, Soares said, "There will be no Czechoslovakia here, there will be no Poland here. Socialism, Yes! Dictatorship, No!"

Not all in Portugal wanted socialism, but most supported the norms and institutions of liberal democracy. For more than four decades following the revolution, the leading center-left and center-right parties alternated as leaders of the government, and Portugal enjoyed remarkable stability. Even as discontent spread across Europe in the 2000s and 2010s and populist parties became vehicles of protest against the status quo, Portugal's two-party duopoly held firm. This was in part because memories of the dictatorship stood as a firewall against antidemocratic forces.

But Portugal wasn't immune to the forces that weakened the traditional center-left and center-right institutions throughout the West. Portugal's fiscal austerity measures after the Great Recession imposed hardship on poor and middle-class households. Wages remained low, while prices—especially for housing—rose substantially, and tax burdens for average families remained high. Guest workers pouring into Portugal from abroad to serve a growing tourism sector created economic and cultural tension. Many in Portugal's rural regions felt that the central government overlooked their sentiments and needs.

These developments generated public discontent to which the established political parties failed to respond. To fill this void, a new populist party called Chega—meaning "enough" in Portuguese—arrived on the scene in 2019. Its founder was André Ventura, then 36, who broke away from the center-right Social Democratic Party. Mr. Ventura has criticized the Romani people for living on government handouts, called for a "drastic reduction of the Islamic presence in the European Union," and advocated chemical castration of pedophiles. He has argued that bureaucratic bloat and high taxes are responsible for Portugal's economic backwardness relative to the rest of Europe. Alarming defenders of the 1974 revolution, Mr. Ventura adopted a slightly modified version of the Salazar regime's slogan ("God, Fatherland, Family") as his party's motto: "God, country, family and work." Like many other populist parties, the Chega party is also critical of the European Union.

Chega's growth has been remarkable. It received 1.3% of the popular vote in the 2019 legislative election, 7.2% in 2022, and 18.1% this March. In five years, its representation in Portugal's 230-seat Assembly has risen from one seat to 50, making it the country's third-largest party. This spring the center-left Socialist Party lost 42 seats and the center-right Democratic Alliance—a three-party coalition that includes the Social Democrats—gained almost nothing, while Chega picked up 38 seats.

Portuguese politics has been thrown into confusion. During elections, the center-right Social Democrats promised that they wouldn't form a coalition with Chega, citing the new party's extremism. Meantime the Socialist Party has refused to form a coalition with the Social Democrats, leaving the Democratic Alliance's 80-seat weak minority government headed by the Social Democrats as the ruling party. It's hard to imagine this government delivering the policies an increasing share of Portuguese voters are demanding, and minority governments in Portugal tend to collapse.

After decades of exceptionalism, Portugal has a political situation resembling much of the West. Public discontent is high, while voters' confidence in established center-left and center-right parties is low. Because the appeal of the far left dwindled after the Soviet Union's collapse, the populist right has emerged as the main vehicle for the expression of public ire. The elections for the European Parliament ending June 9 are likely to extend this shift, clouding the prospects of liberal democracy in a region that once seemed secure.

Appeared in the June 5, 2024, print edition as 'The Populist Right Rises in Portugal'.

About this article

Politics & Ideas

+ Show More

William A. Galston

+ Show More

Buy Side from WSJ

Expert recommendations on products and services, independent from The Wall Street Journal newsroom.

BUY SIDE EXCLUSIVES

Elevate Your Golf Game With a Premium Mullybox

SHOPPING HOLIDAYS

The 23 Best Deals to Shop Online Right Now

GIFTS

Shopping for a Man Who Have Everything? These Gift Ideas Are for You

PERSONAL FINANCE

The Best High-Yield Savings Accounts Right Now

ELECTRONICS

First Headphones From Sonos Are Our New Top Pick

HOME

Upgrade Your Kitchen With These Nonstick Pans