

What the rise of Chega means for Portuguese democracy

*Portugal's legislative elections in March saw the rise of the far-right party Chega, a little over a month before the country celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its Carnation Revolution. **Roni Küppers** and **Maria Stapleton** argue that while Chega's success shows Portuguese voters are aware of the need for reform, the party's answers might only worsen the situation.*

On 25 April this year, Portugal celebrated the [50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution](#) that put an end to the authoritarian *Estado Novo* regime of António de Oliveira Salazar. Portugal is now a strikingly different country that has transitioned from the “proudly alone” motto of the last western colonial empire to a profoundly Europeanised society. Along the way, there have been many achievements that deserve to be celebrated in terms of material, social and cultural progress.

At the same time, the country finds itself at a juncture that speaks back to the original promises of Portuguese democracy. To a certain extent, this juncture is symbolised by the meteoric rise of the far-right Chega in [this year's general election](#), where it secured 18% of the vote. This was a party that notoriously walked out of the Portuguese Parliament on 25 April this year.

An unusual path to democracy

The Portuguese transition has been noted for its unusual circumstances. Originating as a coup led by a section of the military exhausted from fighting multiple colonial liberation wars, the longest dictatorship in 20th century Europe came crumbling down in less than a day, with not so much as a skirmish. This quickly developed into a communist revolution that created severe instability. The situation reached a violent peak in the summer of 1975, after which a counter-coup reoriented democracy towards the liberal, European-style democracy we know today.

Still, the legacy of the revolution has lived on. While the revolutionary path has been

mostly regarded as a traumatic example *not* to follow, more recent perspectives have reevaluated the legacies of the revolution in a positive light. The revolutionary years were marked by striking levels of political and civic mobilisation, orienting the transition into a social transformation that upset traditional hierarchies and reordered economic relations dramatically.

It is no coincidence that Portugal is now at the forefront of Europe in areas such as women's participation in the labour market and cultural tastes. Moreover, the Constitution passed in 1976 is one of the most progressive ever enacted, remaining to this day a staunch guarantee of social rights despite subsequent modifications. Indeed, the whole political spectrum has been historically tilted to the left, with the mainstream right calling itself "social democratic" and the communists remaining an unusually strong electoral force.

Robert Fishman, who has conducted an extensive examination of [the overlooked legacies of the transition](#), argues the anti-hierarchical ethos of the revolution has left a lasting democratic culture that values pluralism, institutional responsiveness and citizen protest. The inclusive, progressive slant of the post-revolutionary political culture conveniently met a context of high economic growth, which was key to creating a virtuous circle of welfare state development, social progress and receding inequalities. This combination produced rapid development until the early 2000s, reflected in the impressive way that Portuguese society "caught up" with the rest of Europe across a variety of social and economic indicators.

All these dynamics contributed to making the Portuguese transition a successful, albeit turbulent, story. And yet, despite these accomplishments, economic, social and political tensions continue, underlining the gap between the "spirit of 25 April" and the reality of Portuguese democracy.

Portugal today

The foremost problem in Portugal is economic. Since the 2000s, the country has suffered from economic stagnation. It confronted the Great Recession in 2008 from a position of comparative weakness. This led to Portugal [requesting a bailout from the Troika in 2011](#).

The Constitutional Court's defence of social rights, combined with widespread protests, managed to moderate the blow. But even if multiple measures from the austerity era have since been rolled back, the consequences have been felt deeply. Budgetary levels in key areas such as health, education and investment remain stagnant today, and socioeconomic inequalities are more pronounced.

A frequently overlooked problem is the gap between ambitious constitutional rights and their delivery. These rights have increasingly relied on private initiatives that channel public funds at the expense of decaying social services (especially healthcare). Increasing dependence on the third sector, [one of the largest in the OECD](#), means the guarantee of social rights lies increasingly beyond the power of democratic institutions and is in the hands of organisations that are under strain.

This dislocation between social rights, democratic legitimacy and equal provision represents a major challenge that is not being addressed despite current economic growth. Passivity on the part of mainstream parties in this area contrasts with the radical reformism of Chega, whose members articulate a brand of neoliberal reformism.

Cuts and privatisation are a key policy concern for Chega. This stands out in a country whose mainstream is skewed to the left. Chega, who focus their campaigning on combatting prevalent corruption scandals, appear to have had some success in convincing voters that shrinking the public sector is the fastest way to stop corruption, and that deficient social provision is solved with *less* funding rather than more. This would be a concerning option in a country that is already lagging in poverty rates and inequality within the EU.

Not all problems derive from economic ills, but the recession inaugurated a new age of mass emigration that has accentuated another structural challenge: that of social cohesion. Indeed, the question of the *nation* is now arguably being debated for the first time in Portugal's modern history. Traditionally a country of emigration, Portugal has become a country of immigration since democratisation, [experiencing waves from the colonies and most recently from Eastern Europe and Asian countries](#).

Combined with a post-recession wave of emigration, these significant shifts in a country of just over 10 million people are challenging the notion of Portugal as a harmonious, homogeneous country. They are also putting to the test the ingrained national myth that

Portugal has a tolerant and pluralistic society. This links back to the revolution, whose policy of radical rupture promoted a culture of amnesia rather than critical engagement with the recent fascist past.

As Pedro Zúquete argues in [a recent book](#), the idea of Portugal as a country of “open arms” is a self-congratulating discourse. It has all too often served to sideline in a post-colonial context the need to tackle the racism denounced by groups like *SOS Racismo*, whose leader Mamadou Ba was famously prosecuted for “[defaming a prominent neo-Nazi](#)”.

Finally, this point links to a third key challenge: a notable lack of social and political participation, contrasting with Fishman’s observations. In contrast to similarly small, culturally homogeneous countries like Norway or Denmark, exceptional national cohesion, [paired with high levels of belonging and national pride](#), has not fostered similarly high levels of civic participation in democratic Portugal. Indeed, the Portuguese are among the [least trusting, least civically engaged](#) in Europe. Despite occasional flashes, such as during the protests against the Troika, the history of Portuguese politics has been one of apathy.

Building on the previous point, a limited capacity to create horizontal ties amid growing diversity suggests a particularly problematic trend that can brew the precise kind of resentment that the far right draws on ([a study on the 2021 presidential election](#), for instance, shows the Chega vote is higher in areas where the Roma community is present).

Moreover, a pronounced decline in electoral turnout has occurred in Portugal since its first democratic election. While the most recent election did see an increase in turnout to just under 60%, this was likely driven in part by disgruntled citizens who viewed Chega as an outlet for their discontent. Portuguese democratic culture therefore continues to be characterised by a gap between the revolutionary “dream” and its actual materialisation which points to a need for institutional renovation.

The future

Following the 2024 election, Chega’s leader, André Ventura, proclaimed the end of the two-party system that had structured Portuguese politics since the democratic transition.

Unlike in other countries such as Austria or Spain, where the centre-right has entered coalition governments with the far right, the system Chega has denounced as corrupt is firmly set on keeping them away from power. The President (centre-right PSD) said as much in an unusual slip from institutional neutrality. Besides the expected rejection of parties on the left, Chega has also met opposition from the liberals.

The constitutional mechanism for electing the Prime Minister does not require majority support in Parliament, and soon after the election, the leader of the victorious centre-right PSD, Luís Montenegro, was sworn into office after being proposed by the President. Yet passing a budget will require Montenegro to either rely on the wounded centre-left (who have already declined any support) or negotiations with Chega (who are keen to find a spot in government and refuse “humiliation”).

Either in government or not, Chega’s rise does reflect a change of opinion in Portuguese society, marking a shift away from the hegemony that the mainstream parties enjoyed even during the recession. A strategy of ignoring and stigmatising Chega, which seems to be the preference for establishment parties, relies on the hope that their success might be a momentary outburst.

This hope might see confirmation in the party’s [disappointing result in the 2024 European Parliament election](#). Yet the successful focus on national corruption of its electoral message, together with the fact that [the Portuguese express exceptional trust in the EU](#), suggests an EU election is not a particularly good test of their strength.

Importantly, Chega does speak to the structural challenges described above. That the Portuguese desire reform is good news. However, the channel they have found for this desire risks undermining the spirit of the revolution that founded Portuguese democracy. The promises of that revolution hold a mirror to present-day Portugal and only the far right seems to dare look back into it. Perhaps after such a shock, the stage is now set for a new challenger to offer a different way out of the stagnating status quo.

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