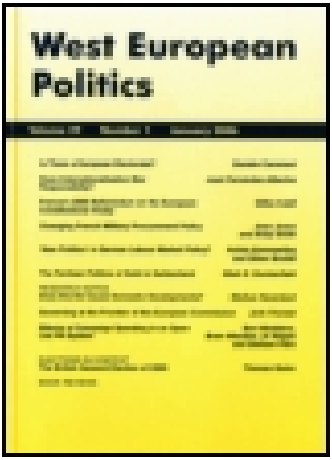

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Goodbye to Revolution: The Portuguese Election of July 1987

Tom Gallagher

The 1987 general election marked a watershed in Portugal's electoral history after a dozen years of minority governments, weak coalitions, and caretaker administrations brought into being by inconclusive elections and centrifugal parties.

The Social Democratic Party (PSD) confounded even sympathetic observers by emerging as the first party in Portuguese history to gain an overall majority of votes and seats in an open contest. Above all, this result was a triumph for its leader, Anibal Cavaco e Silva, who was completely unknown to most Portuguese in 1985, the year in which he seized the helm of the faction-ridden right-of-centre party. Helped by favourable economic trends and, above all, by the disunity of the left, he was able to build up a commanding national position as leader of a minority government that he had been asked to form after the 1985 election which saw the PSD emerge as the largest party with 29.7 per cent of the vote.*

An outsider in the political process, Cavaco possessed enough skill and determination as well as good luck and a propensity for hard work to thwart elements in the political élite (including senior members of his own party) who were temperamentally inclined to sabotage plans for reform and modernisation because they might interfere with the leisurely pace of Lisbon high politics. With a humble background in the Algarve, he lacked the bourgeois origins common to most politicians (including those on the left) and showed himself disdainful of the rhetoric, intrigue and rather sterile ideological debates that are the hallmarks of an inbred political élite. The scale of his victory and the fact that it is very much a personal endorsement especially from the young and a widening band of floating voters, places him in the kind of commanding position that none of the more familiar party leaders who occupied the national stage after the 1974 revolution, ever enjoyed. Portugal thus somewhat unexpectedly finds itself with a dynamic and reasonably secure administration at a time when it faces major challenges ranging from stiff economic competition from its Spanish neighbour to a proposed major review of the radical constitution, and the need to prepare both the economy and the machinery of government for full accession to the EC in 1992.

A vote of no confidence tabled by the left nationalist Party of Democratic Renewal (PRD) had brought down the Cavaco government on 3 April 1987. The PRD had been formed by a heterogeneous collection of independents and refugees from other parties in order to capitalise on the popularity of outgoing president Ramalho Eanes, a former military man and another political

*For a report on the 1985 election, see *West European Politics*, Vol.9, No.4 (October 1986), pp.233–7.

outsider whose dignified and austere style had left a favourable impression on most Portuguese after two terms in office. To capitalise on memories of Eanes's responsible stewardship before these faded and to prevent their rival for the centre-left vote, the Socialist Party, from regrouping, an early election was deemed more suitable than a later one by which time Cavaco's stock might have risen even further. The Socialist Party (PS) reluctantly decided to support the no-confidence motion: it meant giving the impression that it was taking its lead from its chief rival on the left but to abstain might only have caused the even more damaging impression that it was reluctant to face the electorate again so soon after the mauling it had received in 1985.

Cavaco was eager to test his mandate. The recent fall in the value of the dollar and the price of oil had brought much foreign investment, as well as sharply reducing energy costs, thus making Portuguese exports more competitive. In contrast to earlier years, a government was able to offer rising wages and falling prices. But structural reforms, such as a return to the private sector of combines nationalised in 1975 as well as more flexible labour laws, had been stalled by the opposition which possessed a technical majority. If the PRD had not saved it the trouble, a showdown engineered by the government to facilitate a new election had already been widely forecast for some time in 1987.

The decision whether to dissolve Parliament or search around for a new government was in the hands of President Soares and his constitutional advisers. Cavaco was not willing to attempt to form a new cabinet and the only alternative was a coalition of ill-matched left-wing parties that was unlikely to either inspire confidence or last for long. At the risk of alienating the left-wing parties which had reluctantly swung round to his moderate candidature in the 1986 presidential election for want of a suitable alternative, Soares called an election for 19 July. For some time the creator of the PS had been seeking to project himself as an impartial, centrist figure and the office of president had enabled him to do this with consummate success, so he emerged unscathed. Indeed, an opinion poll in May showed him enjoying record popularity with more support emanating from the PSD electorate than from the PS, the party from which he had automatically resigned on becoming head of state;[1] an earlier poll in April also showed that 56 per cent of the electorate were in favour of fresh elections in order to clear the air.[2]

Before campaigning properly got under way in June, the task of filling the party lists from which 250 deputies would be chosen in Portugal's 20 electoral districts or *circles,* had to be completed. As before, the party machines in Lisbon imposed their choices on the provinces with rebellions only breaking out in a few district parties over an especially unpalatable choice. Except in the PSD which nominated many candidates from its dynamic youth wing, there was little sign that talent was emerging from the local party grass-roots outside the hothouse atmosphere of Lisbon. The number of writers, columnists and celebrities who were placed high on party lists, having previously run for rival parties or having remained outside electoral politics, demonstrates the élitist and metropolitan character of politics right across the political spectrum. It underlines two features in Portugal's maturing democracy that reflect trends in earlier phases of constitutional rule:

1. In a semi-developed society with 20 per cent illiteracy where the attainment of an academic degree is still the chief means of upward mobility, prestige as an intellectual is sufficient justification to be incorporated into the electoral process at a senior level without having served any kind of apprenticeship.
2. Ideological boundaries are still fluid and inexact despite the consolidation of four major parties after 1974. This allows national personalities to leap-frog from one to the other without too many accusations of opportunism.

The first direct elections for the 24 seats Portugal had been allocated in the European Parliament were also being held on 19 July. Senhora M.L. Pintasilgo, the radical-left challenger in the presidential election, marked her re-entry into politics by accepting an offer to head the PS list. She toned down her opposition to the EC but, by calling for all the Portuguese MEPs to form a single national group in Strasbourg, she displayed the influence on her thinking of the corporatist nationalist regime which she had served before 1974. But the campaign for Europe was uncontroversial and dull (despite the honest and irreverent television campaign fought by Miguel Esteves Cardoso, an ecology-minded monarchist with a youthful following). Several parties insisted that Portuguese MEPs could make a real difference to the running of the community, but this bombastic nationalism left voters unmoved: 40 per cent were quite unaware of pending European elections according to one June poll, the existence of a single nationwide constituency for the European Parliament obscuring the campaign's visibility.[3]

A nationalist tone also characterised the slogans and television broadcasts of all the parties including those on the far left, some of whom ran merely to take advantage of the constitutional provision which gives all parties, irrespective of size, equal air-time on television. This obligation prompted RTP, the state television company, to drop plans for television debates between the leaders since the numbers involved would have crowded out normal evening programmes.

The party at the outset which seemed to face the biggest threat from the PSD was the traditional clerical CDS, already losing ground to its more secular and centrist erstwhile coalition partner. The CDS slogan, 'Vote for the Majority', suggested that the PSD was not going to get an overall majority and that its own vote could prove decisive in foiling a left-wing one. This thesis was rejected by Cavaco who (ignoring some party advice) declined to revive the Democratic Alliance, a pre-electoral pact with the CDS that had won elections in 1979–80 but had failed to provide cohesive government. Instead, the PSD strategy was to look for votes in the centre and even the left; to this end, members of a socialist ginger group called the Liberal Left, who urged dialogue with the centre for the sake of constitutional reform, were placed on the PSD ticket, and overtures were also made to pro-Soares notables disenchanted by the new-style PS.

Cavaco did not insist on an absolute majority for fear of uniting the left in the way that had occurred during the second round of the presidential election. He ignored his competitors rather than attacking them systematically and made

a pragmatic appeal to the electorate that can be summed up in the phrase: 'I have governed and you are better off. Judge me by my results'. There was no discussion of policies or ideas, and that struck a chord with those voters tired of sterile ideological debate that they found it difficult to connect to ordinary realities. The PSD slogan, 'Portugal cannot slow down', likewise captured the imagination of floating voters who were persuaded that necessary changes were afoot and that the country needed strong government after years of introspection and drift.

The PS slogan, 'Portugal for Everybody', inadequately expressed the party's commitment to a form of social justice which itself was never clearly defined. The campaign was a baptism of fire for its new leader Vitor Constancio, a member of the state banking sector, who had to demonstrate that the party was more than a Soares bandwagon, a PS vote more than a personality one. Constancio performed well but the party's lack of campaign funds was noticeable in many parts of the country, and it was difficult to conceal the fact that this was a contest to regain its dominant position on the left, not to supplant Cavaco. The PS committed a notable gaffe when it criticised Cavaco for not possessing a sufficiently cultural background and, by implication, for being lower-class in origin, a revealing example of its bourgeois mentality as well as its desperation when faced with the PSD steamroller which became known as 'the orange wave', because of the colours of the party.

'More Portugal' was the ephemeral slogan of the PRD, the first party since 1974 to make Portuguese nationalism not only respectable but the chief focus of its identity. General Eanes received a courteous but low-key welcome on the campaign trail and, even before the votes were counted, it was apparent that the ragbag of candidates assembled under the PRD banner were not going to repeat the success it enjoyed in 1985, the year of its birth.

The Communist Party (PCP) fought under a new title, the United Democratic Alliance (CDU) which included a small Green Party and part of the fellow-travelling MDP (the rest of which was standing alone after years of collaboration with the PCP in an electoral front known as APU).[4] The CDU fielded the most professional of the party machines after the PSD. Its energy and visibility stemmed from a plausible fear that due to its unfamiliarity, the CDU's symbol (a buzzing bee) might not secure all the votes that had gone to APU. Its slogan, 'a useful vote', was in part an appeal to radical electors not to waste their ballot by supporting any of the six much smaller shades of Marxism in the field.

Since the election took place on a Sunday at the height of summer with the divided left's prospects of success being meagre, the Communists called for discipline in a bid to stem the abstention rate in their southern strongholds. The results showed their precautions to have been justified but quite ineffectual. While in the north and central strongholds of the PSD the turnout hardly varied from last time, it plunged in the south, the greatest fall, 6.75 per cent, being registered in Setubal, the PCP's chief city stronghold.

The PSD benefited not just from left abstentions but from the spoiling role played by tiny Marxist parties which gathered in 2.89 per cent of the left vote while returning no deputies. Probably it gained its biggest single advantage

TABLE 1

THE PORTUGUESE GENERAL ELECTIONS OF 1985 AND 1987

Party		1985 Votes %	1985 Seats	1987 Votes %	1987 Seats
Social Democratic Party	PSD	29.7	88	50.15	146
Socialist Party	PS	20.8	57	22.32	59
Renewal Party	PRD	18.4	45	4.93	7
Communist Party	CDU[1]	15.5	38	12.18	30
Centre Social Democrats	CDS	9.7	22	4.34	4
Others		6.07	0	3.87	0
Turnout		73.38		72.64	

[1]Communist Party and allies stood in 1985 under the name United People's Alliance (APU).

Election figures from *Diario de Noticias*, 21 July 1987.
Four seats set aside for emigrants had still to be allocated but they did not influence the outcome of the result.

from the collapse of the PRD which lost over three-quarters of the votes it had gained last time, most of them passing to the PSD. Cavaco also received a disproportionate slice of the youth vote and the bulk of the votes of the undecided: for many in both categories a PSD endorsement may have been a vote for having no more elections for four years. The signs are that many electors voted with that feeling uppermost in their minds and were keen to punish the PRD for subjecting the country to yet another month of noisy election cavalcades and piles of rotting electoral debris.

The multiple advantages operating in favour of the PSD enabled its vote to shoot up from 29.87 to 50.15 per cent. It was remarkable indeed in a proportional system for one party to emerge with an absolute plurality of votes, especially given the existence of four other large parties which in the last contest had polled no less than 64.4 per cent of the votes. The result assumes even more significance when it is recalled that, until the end of the 1970s, the PSD's support was largely confined to the more conservative north and centre of Portugal and that it was only weakly implanted in the south. To turn for an illustration to industrial Setubal again: here the party received only a single seat with 5.7 per cent of the vote in 1975 compared with the 6 it won in 1987 with 32.57 per cent of the votes.[5] Regional cleavages which had assumed an important place in electoral politics during the 1970s thus appear to be declining sharply.

The centre-right emerged with a clear majority of votes for the first time in the life of the Third Republic but this outcome conceals the losses suffered by the Catholic CDS, half of whose vote transferred to the PSD, leaving it with only four of its previous 22 deputies. However, in the European election, the CDS polled 15.41 per cent compared with 4.34 per cent for the National Assembly and won the same number of deputies as it now had in the 250-seat Lisbon Parliament. This discrepancy arose from many CDS supporters voting tactically in the general election to ensure a PSD success over the left; in return many PSD voters rewarded the co-operation received from the CDS in their campaigning by supporting the man at the head of the CDS list for

Europe, a former leader of the party, Lucas Pires. Otherwise the support that major parties received in the European contest was generally consistent with their national showing.

The PS was the left-wing party that salvaged most from the wreckage. Its total vote rose, but by only 1.55 per cent above its disastrous 1985 performance, earning it an extra two deputies. Nevertheless, it had broken clear of its rivals, the CDU and the PRD, and was no longer in danger of being eclipsed by either one of them. Constancio was able to claim that the election marked a large step on the way towards his avowed aim of a bipolarised party system whereby two large parties of right and left dominated the electoral process and alternated in office. A two-party system naturally has its adherents in the PSD (the idea of bipolarisation was first popularised by its founder, Sá Carneiro). Moreover, many in the PSD were relieved that the PS had once again emerged as the main party on the left: its votes are vital for any planned constitutional revision to succeed, given that the PSD and CDS between them still lack the necessary two-thirds parliamentary majority. A trade-off may be arranged, with the PS backing some aspects of denationalisation and changes in the labour laws in return for the PSD dropping its preference for a change in the electoral system involving smaller constituencies and their direct representation by named and known individuals. With its stronger implantation locally the PSD stands to gain from such a change except in parts of the south where this factor would work to the advantage of the Communists at the expense of the new PSD deputies returned in 1987.

Hitherto, the chameleon-like character of the PSD has made it difficult to know where to locate it on the political spectrum. The prospect of four unbroken years in office without the need to make damaging compromises to groups on the right and the left should allow much of the ambiguity surrounding the true character of the party to diminish. Counsels are at present divided about whether it should become a true party of the right or adopt the role that circumstances seem to have thrust upon it by becoming a hegemonic party that would occupy an enlarged centre instead of the right; the need to cohabit with a popular centre-left president might cause Cavaco, a man distrustful of ideology, to opt for the second course.

The 1987 election is already being ranked in importance with the 1974 revolution (a left-wing symbol that increasingly produces yawns from most of the nation's youth). Its lasting significance will depend on whether Cavaco is allowed by is own party and by the state administration to press ahead with ambitious plans for modernisation and reform that will inconvenience many vested interests, not just on the corporatist left. Whatever the outcome, the result marks a historical landmark in Portugal's political evolution. In a country where such momentous changes have always previously come about through revolution, foreign intervention, or dictatorial fiat, the earthquake produced by the peaceful exercising of the popular will has given a much-needed boost to democratic institutions and national self-confidence.

NOTES

1. *Expresso* (Lisbon), 30 May 1987.
2. *Expresso,* 4 April 1987.
3. *The Times,* 17 July 1987.
4. The CDU Greens claimed to have the backing of the West German Greens, but several German Green MPs intervened to repudiate this claim and one campaigned on behalf of the ecologically-minded monarchists in the PPM.
5. The PSD came to within several hundred votes of replacing the Communists as the largest party in Setubal district, sometimes known as Portugal's 'red belt'.