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CASE STUDY

January 2025



Carnation revolution

*The military and the
transition to democracy*

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INTRODUCTION

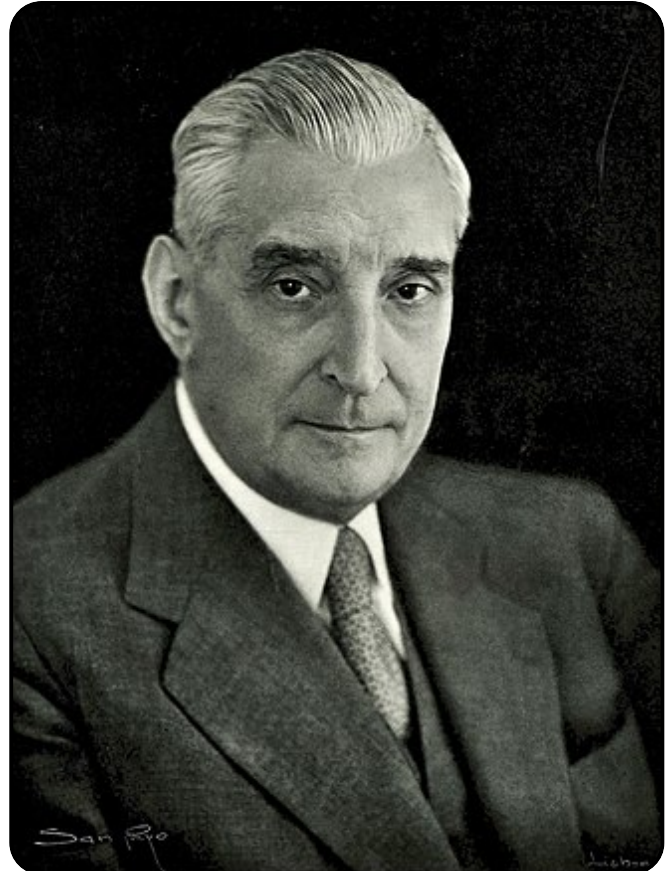
On 25 April 1974, Portugal, Europe's last colonial empire, took an unprecedented step towards democracy thanks to a peaceful coup d'état orchestrated by the Armed Forces Movement (MFA). Nicknamed the 'Carnation Revolution' because of the red flowers worn by the soldiers, this transition to democracy has left its mark on modern history for its peaceful nature and its rejection of violence.

Yet this success was based on deep-seated tensions that had been simmering for decades. While the Salazarist regime, in power since 1933, kept the country in a state of economic and social stagnation, the colonial wars in Africa weighed heavily on the national finances and exacerbated frustrations among both the civilian population and the army. Brutal repression by the secret police, the PIDE, stifled all opposition, but at the same time fuelled clandestine resistance and critical thinking, particularly among the military.

The Carnation Revolution raises a number of questions: to what extent can this unique event be considered a successful exception among the democratic transitions initiated by an army in the twentieth century?

This study sets out to examine the structural causes that led to the revolution, the central role played by the army in its unfolding and the lessons that this episode offers for understanding the dynamics of democratic transitions. Through an analysis of the colonial and economic context, military mobilisation and post-revolutionary political management

we seek to identify the elements that made this revolution a singular and inspiring historical moment.



Official photo of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, Prime Minister of Portugal (1968)

I. AN ANACHRONISTIC COLONIAL CONTEXT IN EUROPE AND AN ECONOMY IN CRISIS

Portugal, under the Salazarist and later the Caetanist dictatorship, was one of the last European states to maintain an extensive colonial empire, which in Africa included the following territories: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe. These colonies were the scene of particularly brutal wars of independence, in which Portuguese forces employed repressive tactics including the use of napalm, as in Guinea-Bissau. These conflicts, which spanned more than a decade (1961-1974), exhausted Portugal's human and financial resources and reinforced the regime's international isolation.

This military violence was compounded

by a deep economic stagnation. The dictatorship, in place since 1933 under António de Oliveira Salazar and then Marcelo Caetano, kept the country in a state of chronic poverty. Despite relative economic growth in the 1960s thanks to industrialisation (limited) and emigration (massive), a large part of the population remained rural, illiterate and marginalised. Political and economic isolation, exacerbated by international sanctions, reinforced the impression that the regime was obsolete and out of touch with modern aspirations. This lack of access to education and information was a tool for controlling the regime, but also a brake on modernisation.

This double crisis, colonial and economic, was prolonged by a climate of repression that stifled any desire for change.



Workers and soldiers joined forces during Portugal's 1974 revolution

II. REPRESSION AS A CATALYST FOR DISCONTENT

The regime was based on systematic repression orchestrated by the PIDE (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado). This secret police carried out campaigns of surveillance, arbitrary imprisonment and torture against dissidents, including intellectuals, students, workers and soldiers opposed to the war. However, this repression contributed to the emergence of underground movements, including opposition parties such as the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and trade union networks.

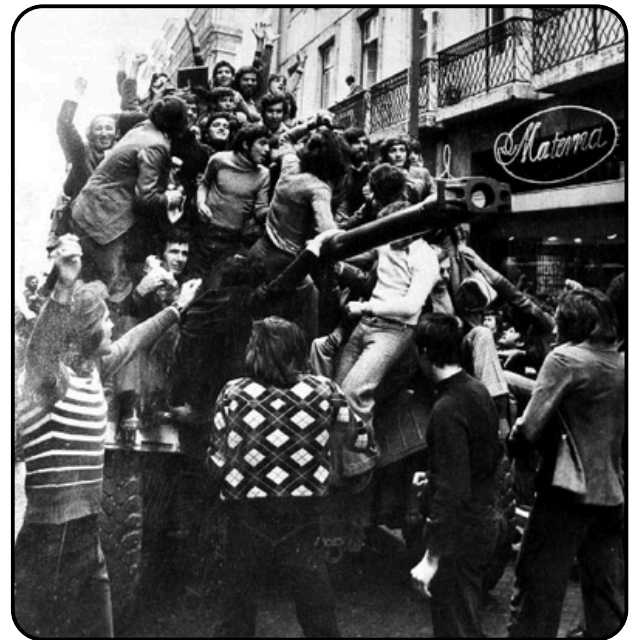
The colonial wars, perceived as hopeless conflicts, fuelled deep disenchantment among the military.

Junior officers, who were often educated and from the lower middle classes, found themselves faced with a war that they considered morally and strategically untenable. Antonio de Spínola, Governor of Guinea-Bissau, acted as a catalyst by publishing *Portugal and the Future* (1974), in which he argued for a political solution to the colonial problem. Although this book led to his being sidelined, his ideas provided food for thought for the young officers of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), who were convinced that only a radical break with the past could save the country. These internal cracks in the army were soon to develop into a real breakaway movement, giving rise to the *Movimento das Forças Armadas* (MFA).

III. THE DECISIVE ROLE OF THE ARMY IN THE TRANSITION

On 25 April 1974, the MFA, made up of a core group of young officers, launched a military coup that overthrew the regime without any notable violence. The revolution was immediately supported by the civilian population, tired of decades of repression and misery. Red carnations, distributed in the streets of Lisbon and placed in the barrels of soldiers' rifles, became the symbol of a peaceful transition and democratic hope. This bloodless success was testimony not only to the skilful strategy of the insurgents, but also to the culture of non-violence ingrained in Portuguese society.

The Carnation Revolution took place in a unique context. Unlike other military coups d'état of the twentieth century, often followed by prolonged dictatorships,



Celebration in Lisbon, 25 April 1974.

the MFA rapidly facilitated the transition to a democratic regime. However, this process was not without its tensions: the years following the revolution were marked by struggles between political factions, massive economic

nationalisations and the difficult withdrawal of the colonies. The Portuguese experience nevertheless offers a valuable lesson in the role that a politicised and reformist army can play in a successful democratic transition.

CONCLUSION

The Carnation Revolution saw the Portuguese army, driven by a general disavowal of the policies in place and a desire for peaceful transformation, become a key vehicle for democratisation. The role of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) highlights the importance of internal coordination and a long-term strategic vision, such as that inspired by António de Spínola, in transforming an insurrection into a successful process of political transition.

However, the unique characteristics of this event - non-violence, a strong rejection

of colonial wars and a national culture oriented towards peace - make it an exception that is difficult to replicate. Recent events show that without a clear commitment to returning power to civilians, the military tends to remain in power for long periods.

Consequently, any attempt to encourage a positive role for the army in a democratic transition must be preceded by a great deal of multi-criteria convincing (convictions, self-interest) accompanied by solid institutional guarantees and an international framework supporting the transition.



Mural painted in 2014, 40 years after the Carnation Revolution, in Lisbon, Portugal

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