Governments, Parliaments and Parties (Portugal)

By Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses

Summary

Founded in October 1910, the Portuguese Republic was soon mired in turmoil. The victorious Portuguese Republican Party, in reality a broad ideological coalition united only by the desire to topple the monarchy, soon fragmented acrimoniously, first into a variety of factions, and later into separate parties. The hope that the war might lead, if not to a reunification of the original party, then at least to a dignified truce that would enhance the regime's prestige (an important objective among interventionists), soon showed itself to be vain. Conflict between and within the parties increased until, exhausted, the regime as it had existed succumbed in December 1917.

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Introduction

Three political parties dominated parliamentary life in the recently created Portuguese Republic. Up until the October 1910 Revolution that toppled the centuries-old monarchy (by then a constitutional monarchy), the parties had been united under the banner of the Portuguese Republican Party. The outbreak of war in 1914 heightened tensions both among these three organizations and between them and their challengers, notably the monarchists. The monarchists were also divided among themselves and unable to agree on a common strategy to recover power. Portugal's entry into the conflict in March 1916 would bring about a realignment within republican politics, and a short-lived truce did indeed follow. However, after numerous twists and turns, a coup d'état in December 1917 brought the whole edifice crashing down. The coup brought Sidónio Pais (1872-1918), a figure largely unknown to the general public, to power. This article covers the period from the start of the First World War until Pais' coup. Important strides have been made in our understanding of the political evolution of the period since the mid-1970s, when A. H. de Oliveira Marques began to publish on the subject.

Background: From 5 October 1910 until the German Declaration of War (March 1916)

Republican Politics after 1910

Portuguese historiography now recognizes that there was no inevitability in the republican triumph of 1910. It was at least as much the shortcomings of monarchist politicians as the successes of their republican counterparts that led to the regime change. Strong in the capital, the Portuguese Republican Party's (PRP) influence across the rest of the country was patchy at best. The PRP was a very broad ideological church, as would be amply demonstrated by the debates surrounding the drafting of the 1911 constitution.[1] However, it found it difficult to effectuate the kind of electoral breakthrough that might allow it to challenge monarchist dominance of the state apparatus. The monarchy, bereft of friends and supporters, was brought down by force, but not overwhelming force.

In 1908 there had been an attempt to wipe out the whole royal family, which cost the lives of Carlos I, King of Portugal (1863-1908) and Luís Filipe, Crown Prince of Portugal (1887-1908) and left the young Manuel II, King of Portugal (1889-1932) on the throne. His reign was cut short two and a half years later by a violent revolt, planned by secret societies that kept in touch with the PRP, to whom they quickly surrendered power. The revolt met little opposition.

Very quickly, however, the internal tensions within the victorious PRP came to the fore, leading to the emergence of three parties by February 1912. These were the PRP itself, now

generally termed the Democrats, and two more conservative parties known as the Evolutionists and the Unionists, whose inability to coalesce into a single force contributed to their marginalization. Each of the three parties had a collective leadership known as a directory. However, all three also had an undoubted inspirational figure. For the Democrats, this was Afonso Costa (1871-1937); for the Evolutionists and Unionists it was António José de Almeida and Manuel de Brito Camacho, respectively.[2] The Democrats found it hard to accept the legitimacy of the other parties. Afonso Costa regularly preached the need to restore party unity as a way of resolving the country's difficulties; his opponents refused what they saw as a simple amalgamation.

The War Begins

The split in the original PRP, which took place over the course of 1911, left the Democrats in control of the House of Representatives, but in a minority position in the Senate; it left also a president of the Republic (elected by parliamentarians only), Manuel de Arriaga (1840-1917), who was favourable to the smaller, conservative parties. The regime's political life was essentially paralyzed by this conflict. When war broke out in Europe, Portugal's government was a temporary arrangement. Headed by Bernardino Machado (1851-1944), whom Arriaga had defeated in the presidential vote, it had been charged by the president with steering the state through to the next legislative elections, so that these might be seen as untainted by party influence, a staple of elections under the constitutional monarchy.

The war, however, changed everything. Political opinion was split on the best way forward for Portugal; so too were the republican parties and ultimately the government itself. The war raised the stakes in political life; it increased the potential rewards of being in power. When the government bungled a first attempt to bring Portugal into the conflict on the side of Portugal's historical ally, Great Britain, and its ideological mentor, France – occasioned by a French request for the Portuguese army's 75 mm guns – the Democrats' patience exhausted itself. They shunted the government aside, refusing to grant it their parliamentary confidence. Many were also preoccupied with the fact that as war loomed, a monarchist uprising had taken advantage of the army's apprehension and led to the temporary seizure of important military installations at Mafra, close to Lisbon.[3]

Interventionists and Their Rivals

Afonso Costa and his Democratic Party were the most solidly interventionist of all political formations in Portugal. They saw in the war a chance not only to consolidate the country's international reputation (thus ensuring the safety of its overseas provinces, as Portugal's colonies were called) and that of the regime, but also to increase domestic support for the

embattled Republic. António José de Almeida's Evolutionists also favoured intervention. Their denunciations of Germany's intentions and leaders were, at the very least, vehement. However, they proposed to wait until the country was ready to intervene militarily before entering the conflict. Brito Camacho's Unionists professed their preference for an Allied victory, but argued against rash action, and proposed to wait until Great Britain appealed for Portuguese help in the struggle against Germany. Anything else, Camacho argued in his newspaper *A Luta*, would be a quixotic action which might very well tie Britain down when it needed to call upon all of its strength to defeat Germany.[4]

The tiny Portuguese Socialist Party was split on the way forward, as was monarchist opinion: while professing themselves ready to defend Portuguese territory from invasion, most monarchists were decidedly against an attempt to bring the country into the conflict. The broad mass of Portuguese, who did not participate in politics due to franchise restrictions, were not consulted. However, aside from a small nucleus of interventionist intellectual figures, there was a generalized desire for caution. The armed forces, well aware of their weakness, were especially cautious.

The Pimenta de Castro Interlude

The newly awakened desire to decide on Portugal's role in the war was matched by the older desire to control the electoral process. The regime change was not expected to break the iron law of Portuguese politics, as inherited from the monarchy: sitting governments won elections.[5] In spite of Manuel de Arriaga's best efforts, early 1915 witnessed a naked fight for power and the army's arrival on the political scene. The army protested against political interference in its affairs and a number of officers handed in their ceremonial swords to the president of the Republic. The president, despairing of the political class surrounding him, entrusted power to a neutral figure, General Pimenta de Castro (1846-1918), in yet another attempt to cool passions and entrust the holding of elections to a non-partisan authority.

For the Democrats, imbued with an almost providential sense of mission, this was an unacceptable assault on their right to hold power and lead the country to war. But Pimenta de Castro made matters worse by issuing a blanket amnesty allowing exiled monarchist leaders to return and by openly stating his outright opposition to Portuguese participation in the war.[6] For the Democrats, an interventionist posture had become a touchstone, distinguishing "true" republicans from camouflaged reactionary opponents or mere opportunists. It came as little surprise when, on 14 May 1915, a violent revolt – much deadlier than that of October 1910 – overthrew the government and led to a series of reprisals against the Democrats' enemies.

The Democrats in Control

What followed was the complete control of the political system by Afonso Costa's Democrats. Eager to protect himself from the accusation of seeking personal power, Costa allowed a secondary figure to lead the cabinet; a fall from a moving tram, which landed him in hospital, further delayed his return to active politics. But it did not really matter, for his party had swept the board in the elections following the revolt, establishing an absolute majority in both chambers and electing Bernardino Machado to the presidency of the Republic. Portugal was now set on a course for war; all that was needed was a pretext. In late November 1915, Afonso Costa, fully recovered from his injuries, became prime minister for the second time in his life, setting the country on a course for immediate military intervention.

The First Sacred Union Government

The Sacred Union is Formed

Following the German declaration of war, an attempt was made to reconfigure republican politics in March 1916. Following the French model, a Sacred Union was proclaimed. All parliamentary parties were invited to join this broad coalition in the country's defence. What resulted, however, fell far short of a grand republican coalition (an idea which failed, in any case, to hold out an olive branch to monarchists, Catholics, and socialists). In the end, only Democrats and Evolutionists entered the Sacred Union, with Unionists promising to support it from the opposition benches on matters of national importance. In a sign of good will, Afonso Costa made way for António José de Almeida to head the government, preserving the finance ministry for himself and two other key portfolios for his supporters: foreign affairs for Augusto Soares (1873-1954) and war for José Maria Norton de Matos (1867-1955), a late convert to the republican cause who now set out to organize expeditionary forces bound for Africa and, the government hoped, France. But the nature of Portugal's intervention, and the suspicion that the Democrats' interventionism was born out of a lust for power, never disappeared. It would resurface time and time again in the years to come, undermining their ability to rally the country around the war effort. The calls for a "white book" on the intervention, revealing all of the documentation exchanged with Germany and the Allies, would be heard until well after the war's end.

Initial Difficulties

The commitment to the European battlefield was a controversial one, and would dominate the nation's attention in the period to come. It was one thing to find oneself at war with Germany, having to contend with a U-boat presence on one's shores and an enemy military presence north of Mozambique. It was quite another to volunteer an army to the Western

Front, which, no matter how large, would never represent more than a symbolic contribution given the size of the armies deployed in the trenches. The Sacred Union's participants were united in their desire to see a Portuguese army fighting in France and took the necessary steps to bring it about.

However, other matters soon arose that divided them. The first was the question of an amnesty. For Evolutionists, this was a key component of their strategy to pacify the political situation in the country. They had been pressing for such a measure since the party's constitution. They wanted it as extensive and inclusive as possible, including, for example, Pimenta de Castro's collaborators. But the Democrats did not agree; for them, some political transgressions could not be forgotten or forgiven. Just one month into its existence, the government was in trouble; only the personal intervention of Bernardino Machado prevented António José de Almeida from walking away from his office.

Tensions would continue to mount over the reintroduction of the death penalty, seen as an unfortunate prerequisite for preserving discipline at the front; the political application of wartime press censorship; and another issue close to the Evolutionists' heart – a constitutional revision to empower the president of the Republic to dissolve parliament. By June 1916, the monarchist press openly ridiculed the Evolutionists, who, it was said, had finally woken up to the fact that they were not in control of their destiny. Worse would follow in October 1916, when the government announced that most of the ships seized from Germany – that country's *casus belli* against Portugal – would be chartered to Britain. The disclosure clashed with the original account of the seizure, which centered on guaranteeing Portugal's access to vital supplies, and generated more doubt about what really lay behind the country's participation in the conflict.

The Machado Santos Rising and Its Consequences

In November 1916, the government put off local elections, alleging the need to preserve public order at a time when it was threatened by internal conspiracies and foreign attacks – German submarines were active in Portuguese waters. Socialists, Unionists and monarchists all came together to accuse the Sacred Union of running scared of the electorate. But the bad news continued to flow. On 3 December 1916, a U-boat surfaced outside the city of Funchal, in Madeira, proceeding to shell it with impunity. This embarrassment was followed two days later by news of a heavy defeat in Newala, German East Africa. This development ended Portugal's disastrous invasion of the territory, details of which began to filter back.

The following week, with the country still trying to ascertain the magnitude of the disaster, a coup attempt shook Portugal as it prepared to say goodbye to the first contingent of troops leaving for France. Machado Santos (1875-1921), a naval officer who had made his reputation

in the fighting of October 1910 but since been marginalized, established links with a number of military units, as well as monarchists and syndicalists, in the hope of overthrowing the Sacred Union cabinet. He failed, and was arrested along with a number of co-conspirators. Legislative action followed in response. Retroactive measures were passed in parliament that allowed those accused of sedition to be held under arrest with no charges being made against them, until the end of the war, when they would be tried. This gagging measure was too much for a number of Evolutionist backbenchers, who, amid much acrimony, abandoned their party and joined the Unionists in what was dubbed the “Parliamentary Bloc” – a term first used in 1911 to signify all those opposed to the Afonso Costa-led wing of the PRP.

The End of the First Sacred Union Government

Matters soon went from bad to worse. In April 1917, with Afonso Costa out of the country and António José de Almeida ill (a common occurrence), civil war broke out within the Sacred Union over the recently established National Economic Council. The council was a body that brought together the government and the country’s “living forces”, as economic interest groups were then called. The body, officially recognized thanks to a recent decree, had its own budget, secretariat, and access to the government gazette for publication of its opinions. For the Democrats, it represented a rival to the parliament, where they held sway, and could not be tolerated. When the ministers present in the chamber made the issue one of confidence in the executive, Democratic backbenchers and the opposition joined forces against the government, forcing its collapse. Opinion, not unnaturally, was divided over what had just happened. Independent observers, Portuguese or otherwise, found it hard to believe that the Democratic backbenchers would have acted without the approval of their leader.[7] In any case, Afonso Costa took over the reins of power. While the Sacred Union label survived, the reality was that the Democrats were now in complete control of the cabinet, while the Evolutionists promised to lend their support on issues of national importance.

The Second Sacred Union Government

A Wounded Leader

What makes it impossible to completely dismiss the notion of a truly independent backbench revolt, with the Evolutionists as an unfortunate target, was that Afonso Costa’s leadership would also be contested over the course of the year, as the situation in Portugal became ever bleaker. The new government’s composition led influential backbenchers (with the blessing of more senior party figures) to draft a letter to Costa calling for the formation of a truly national government and a reappraisal of the country’s commitment to the conflict. This would ensure that Portugal’s financial and economic recovery were paramount concerns.

Costa stifled this and other similar initiatives. However, they reveal that he was losing his popularity within the party under the strain of war. They also highlight the fact that the opposition's concerns about the country's course were well-founded and not just the result of political opportunism and chicanery. Over the summer of 1917, republican newspapers speculated that Costa would be forced out by the ever-more-popular (among Democrats) Norton de Matos. Costa disappeared from sight; close advisors – often drawn from his family – kept the rest of the country at bay. Shut up in his offices as social and economic conditions worsened, and as men continued to leave for the front, his popularity vanished.

The Secret Sessions of Parliament and Their Aftermath

In July 1917 perhaps the most important event in the political history of the period occurred. When Norton de Matos announced predicted losses of 4,000 men per month in France, the opposition demanded, and obtained, the right to hold secret sessions of parliament to discuss the causes and the nature of Portugal's intervention in the conflict. These sessions would come to a premature end when the opposition walked out after protesting the government's lack of forthright answers. But while they raged, the depth of the enmity that now existed between the estranged members of the "republican family" became clear to all parliamentarians.

Thwarted in the secret session, Brito Camacho made his frustration known to the press afterwards: nothing could be achieved in parliament, he explained, where the tyranny of numbers was used to keep the opposition at bay. But he knew that plans were afoot to overcome the Democrats. On a constitutional level, a new party, the Centrists, was being formed by Egas Moniz (1874-1955), a renowned doctor who had played a part in the 1911 Constituent discussions but who had since faded from the scene. It was his hope, he said, to attract all those who did not identify with the sectarianism that seemed to have gripped the regime.[8] For the moment however, he only attracted the dissenting Evolutionists.

The long-delayed local elections, finally held in autumn 1917, showed a serious loss of popularity among the interventionist parties. But not all were prepared to wait. In the offices of Brito Camacho's *A Luta*, another Unionist party member, Sidónio Pais, was busy plotting to take power by force of arms. His coup, which eventually proved successful, was carried out amidst frenzied newspaper speculation. The newspapers suggested that at the very start of the impending parliamentary term, deputies drawn from all parties would come together to force Afonso Costa from the government and create a new and revitalized republican unity cabinet. Costa and his colleagues were spared this indignity, but subsequent events would show that the Democratic Party was resolved to try its luck without its historic leader, too badly damaged by the war.

Conclusion

The German declaration of war in March 1916 was provoked by Portugal, whose interventionist leadership saw the war as a shortcut to the domestic and international consolidation of their regime. This was a miscalculation. The distance that separated the various republican factions from each other (not to mention republicans from monarchists, socialists, Catholics, and trade-unionists) was great by 1914. The violent and deeply personal debate that surrounded intervention in the on-going European war made cooperation impossible. Without it, and given the suspicions that surrounded the reasons for Portugal's participation in the conflict, the Republic grew weaker. Not only did Evolutionists and Democrats find it impossible to work together, they also succumbed to internal strife. One of the most striking aspects of Sidónio Pais' triumph in the coup launched on 5 December 1917 was the lack of opposition from the bands of armed civilians. These bands had toppled both the monarchy and Pimenta de Castro and had intimidated the Democrats' enemies whenever necessary. Thanks to the war, the Republic as it had existed since its inception was a spent force.

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Notes

1. Actas da Assembleia Nacional Constituinte de 1911 [Minutes of the National Constituent Assembly of 1911], Lisbon 1986. ↑
2. For Afonso Costa, see: Meneses, Filipe Ribeiro de: Afonso Costa. Portugal, London 2010. For António José de Almeida, see: Pires, Ana Paula: António José de Almeida. O Tribuno da República, Lisbon 2011. ↑
3. On Portugal's entry into the conflict, see: Valente, Vasco Pulido: "Revoluções. A 'República Velha' (Ensaio de Interpretação Política)" ["The 'Old Republic' (An Essay in Political Interpretation)"], in: Análise Social 27 (1992), pp. 7-63; Severiano Teixeira, Nuno: O Poder e a Guerra, 1914. Objectivos Nacionais e Estratégias Políticas na Entrada de Portugal na Grande Guerra [Power and the War, 1914: National Objectives and Political Strategies at the Time of Portugal's Entry into the Great War], Lisbon 1996; Fraga, Luís Alves de: O Fim da Ambiguidade. A Estratégia Nacional Portuguesa de 1914 a 1916 [The End of Ambiguity: Portuguese National Strategy from 1914 to 1916], Lisbon 2001; Meneses , Filipe Ribeiro de: Portugal 1914-1926. From the First World War to Military Dictatorship, Bristol 2004. ↑
4. Manuel de Brito Camacho's wartime writings can be found in: de Brito Camacho, Manuel: Portugal na Guerra [Portugal at War], Lisbon 1935. ↑
5. On Portuguese elections in the period, see: Lopes, Fernando Farelo: Poder Político e

Caciquismo na Primeira República Portuguesa [Political Power and Caciquismo in the Portuguese First Republic], Lisbon 1994. ↑

6. Pimenta de Castro's account of his time in power can be found in: General Joaquim Pereira Pimenta de Castro, O Ditador e a Afrontosa Ditadura Ditadura [The Dictator and his Offending Dictatorship], Weimar 1915. A new investigation of his short-lived government can be found in: Navarro, Bruno J.: Governo de Pimenta de Castro. Um General no Labirinto Político da I República [The Pimenta de Castro Government. A General in the First Republic's Political Labyrinth], Lisbon 2011. ↑
7. For example: Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris, Guerre 1914-1918, Portugal, Dossier Général, 634, letter, Daeschner to Ribot, 21 April 1917. ↑
8. On Egas Moniz, see: Moniz, Egas: Um Ano de Política [A Year in Politics], Lisbon 1919. ↑

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