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Portugal is not immune to right-wing populism after all

The Portuguese right-wing populist Chega is making inroads into Communist strongholds — with revisionist positions on racism and colonialism

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At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic last month, the Portuguese parliament discussed an extension of the state of emergency and new restrictions on public life. Right now, Portugal is experiencing a critical situation: over 250 people are dying of the respiratory disease every day. And no other country in the world has such high numbers of new infections.

During the parliamentary debate, André Ventura, the only deputy of the right-wing populist Chega party, gave a two-minute campaign speech against the Socialist government. He used the word 'shame' five times, while at the same time welcoming the proposed closure of the border and, in the end, voted against the extension of the state of emergency without justifying his political stance.

This behaviour is part and parcel of his strategy. 'Ventura wants to shock. Even if he pretends to say something truthful, he is still just an opportunist with only one goal in mind: he wants to get into power,' says political scientist Marina Costa Lobo of the University of Lisbon's ICS social science institute.

Voters switching from left to right

Ventura has now come one small step closer to achieving his goal. In the presidential elections on 24 January, he received 11.9 per cent or nearly 500,000 votes. This means that in the parliamentary elections a year and a half ago, the former tax officer with a PhD in law won around eight times as many votes as his party, *Chega* (whose name means 'Enough!'). How can his rise be explained in a country that until recently still seemed

immune to right-wing populism?

The political scientist Costa Lobo concludes that the Portuguese are no different from other Europeans. Around one-fifth of the Portuguese population shares views that would coincide with the ideas of right-wing populist parties, says Costa Lobo: 'There was a demand, but no supply. And the Chega party and André Ventura have now filled that demand. Their agenda is characterised by an "anti-" attitude. They are against what is politically correct, against a liberal migration policy and against the accusation that Portugal is racist.'

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Even if the results of the Portuguese presidential elections can be used only to a limited extent to uncover general political trends, one development cannot be ignored: Portugal's right-wing populists are particularly strong in a region that voted left for decades. The Alentejo is one of the very few regions in Western Europe where a Marxist-Leninist Communist Party still calls the shots in many places at the local level. In the Portoalegre constituency, André Ventura won 20 per cent of the vote, his best election result nationwide.

Political scientist Riccardo Marchi of the University of Lisbon does not believe that the older core voters of the Communist Party will now switch over to the camp of right-wing populists. But that could well be the case with the younger generation: 'Younger, more apolitical voters who voted for the Communists because it was practically a family tradition, may feel attracted to *Chega* and the nationalist, populist discourse.'

The battle over Portugal's colonial history

Racism could also serve as an explanation of the rise of right-wing populists in Portugal. In his autobiographical book *Returning to Reims* published in 2009, French author Didier Eribon already described how former Communist voters in northern France switched to the camp of the Front National. According to Eribon, voting left does not offer protection against racist thinking.

The *Chega* party plays this card in two ways. On the one hand, it attracts

attention with its racist tirades against Sinti and Roma, who largely live in run-down social housing districts at Lisbon's periphery and also in the rural Alentejo region. At the height of the first Corona wave in April, André Ventura called for Sinti and Roma to be locked up in a kind of forced camp so that the supposedly unusually high spread of the virus among this population group would not be transmitted to others. It comes as no surprise that the right-wing populist chose the Sinti and Roma as a target: large parts of the Portuguese population still have great prejudices against the minority group.

On the other hand, at the same time Ventura and his party are making an effort to create a nationalist interpretation of Portuguese colonial history. Large parts of the population still believe that the Portuguese were not aggressively racist colonial masters, but that they tolerated and even promoted the peaceful coexistence and cooperation between whites and blacks. Recently, more and more Portuguese, many of them from African migrant backgrounds, have been resisting this trivialising historiography. The first memorial for the victims of slavery is now slated to be built in Lisbon.

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Nevertheless, the large moderate parties such as the Socialists and the liberal-conservative PSD are reluctant to put the reappraisal of Portuguese colonial history at the centre of a broad social debate. And the right-wing populists have taken advantage of this. André Ventura and his fellow party members organised two demonstrations in Lisbon last summer, with several hundred participants each, under the slogan 'Portugal is not racist'. To some Portuguese this may seem like a bad joke considering that leading right-wing extremists, such as Mário Machado, the founder of the 'Hammerskins' neo-Nazi group, have already publicly supported the *Chega* party.

Racism today

However, there is more at stake in Portugal than just memory politics. The country has to contend with a latent racism that is also reflected in its institutions and authorities. The number of complaints that victims of racism have reported to an independent commission has grown steadily over the past few years. But in reality, only a fraction of the perpetrators actually face consequences. This also applies to the Portuguese security

forces. Two years ago the European Commission warned that there was excessive violence and racist behaviour occurring in the ranks of the Portuguese police. In protest against this allegation, thousands of police officers have joined together on the Internet to form a loosely organised movement, whose secret star is André Ventura.

The rise of the right-wing populists in Portugal, however, is also the consequence of a crisis within the moderate Portuguese right-wing parties. Like the leader of the Spanish right-wing populist Vox party, Santiago Abascal, Ventura originally comes from the ranks of the country's largest conservative party, the PSD. In coalition with the smaller right-wing conservative CDS party, it implemented tough austerity measures from 2011 onwards during the sovereign debt crisis. But it was not until December 2015 that the right-wing government was ousted, after the Socialists joined forces with the more radical left-wing parties for the first time in the history of Portuguese democracy.

'That brought about the crisis of the right-wing parties, especially the right-wing conservative CDS,' says political scientist António Costa Pinto. Not only are CDS voters now switching to *Chega*, but also former CDS leaders. The most dazzling example is *Chega*'s chief ideologue Diogo Pacheco de Amorim, who at the time of the Carnation Revolution in the 1970s had campaigned with a radical right-wing grouping for an authoritarian conservative state.

André Ventura wants to turn *Chega* into a major new right-wing populist party. One current survey indicates that so far this has amounted to little more than a dream: According to this survey, two-thirds of the Portuguese are against Ventura and the ideas of his party outright. For the right-wing populists, however, the presidential elections were nothing more than a successful test run. Local elections will be held in Portugal in autumn. That will really be an opportunity to gauge whether *Chega* will become the third largest political force in the country.

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