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The Politics of Portugal

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Introduction

Understanding the politics of Portugal requires an appreciation of both its rich historical journey and the contemporary dynamics that define its political system today. Since the establishment of the republic in the early twentieth century, Portugal has experienced dramatic political transitions: from monarchy to an unstable First Republic, through decades of authoritarian rule, and finally to a robust democracy rooted in the values of pluralism and the rule of law. This book, *The Politics of Portugal: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Portugal*, aims to be a comprehensive reference for anyone seeking to understand how Portugal's political institutions, actors, and processes function and evolve.

Portugal's political system is based on a unique blend of a semi-presidential model and a parliamentary democracy. The division of executive power between a directly elected president and a government headed by a prime minister creates both checks and balances and opportunities for cooperation and tension. The Assembly of the Republic, Portugal's unicameral legislature, plays a central role in legislation and in holding the government accountable, while the judiciary acts as an independent guarantor of rights and constitutional order. These structures, rooted in the transformative Constitution of 1976, reflect Portugal's commitment to democracy following the peaceful Carnation Revolution.

Central to modern Portuguese politics is the dynamic interplay between its main political parties, particularly the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD), which have alternated in government and shaped national policy agendas. Alongside these dominant parties, new and emergent actors have enriched parliamentary debate and introduced a diversity of perspectives, from the rise of populist and environmentalist parties to coalitions promoting both progressive and conservative values. Beyond the capital, local government and the autonomous regions of the Azores and Madeira contribute to a sense of political pluralism and regional identity, ensuring that governance is responsive to Portugal's diverse communities.

Portugal's integration into the European Union has reshaped many aspects of its governance, economy, and societal aspirations. European membership has fostered modernization, growth, and the adoption of EU standards and practices, while also exposing Portugal to new policy debates, challenges, and opportunities. The country's position within the broader European and global contexts is a vital element in its foreign policy and in domestic policy debates, influencing decisions on economic strategy, social welfare, and environmental sustainability.

Despite its political stability and democratic achievements, Portugal faces persistent challenges. Issues such as corruption, the efficacy of its judicial system, ongoing reforms in health and education, economic inequality, and the integration of diverse communities remain at the forefront of political discourse. Contemporary events, from financial crises to the impact of global migration flows, test not only state institutions but also popular expectations of governance and social justice.

This book endeavors to provide a clear and accessible exploration of these topics and more, guiding readers through Portugal's historical legacies, institutional frameworks, election systems, and the rich variety of actors who shape the nation's political life. Whether you are a student, a researcher, a traveler, or a curious observer, this guide invites you to better understand how Portugal's political system works, the factors which have shaped it, and the questions it faces as it moves forward into the future.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Evolution of Portuguese Politics

Portugal's political journey is a captivating narrative, marked by dramatic shifts and the enduring pursuit of stability and democracy. From its ancient roots as a kingdom to its current status as a democratic republic, the nation has navigated a complex path, shaped by internal struggles, external pressures, and pivotal moments of transformation. Understanding this history is crucial to grasping the nuances of contemporary Portuguese politics.

For centuries, Portugal was a monarchy, a system of governance that defined its identity and expansionist ambitions. This long period saw the rise of a global empire, built on maritime exploration and trade. However, by the late 19th century, the monarchy faced growing discontent. Economic difficulties, political corruption, and a burgeoning republican movement fueled calls for change.

The dawn of the 20th century brought a dramatic turning point. On October 5, 1910, a revolution swept away the monarchy and ushered in the First Portuguese Republic. This new era was intended to be one of democratic rule and progress, but it quickly became characterized by instability. The First Republic, which lasted until 1926, was a turbulent period with frequent changes in government, political factionalism, and social unrest. Despite its shortfalls, the First Republic did lay some groundwork for future democratic aspirations.

The tumultuous nature of the First Republic paved the way for a drastic shift in Portugal's political trajectory. In 1926, a military coup brought an end to the fragile parliamentary democracy. This ushered in a period of authoritarian rule that would last for nearly five decades. The *Ditadura Militar* (Military Dictatorship) was established, which transitioned into the *Ditadura Nacional* (National Dictatorship) in 1928.

In 1932, António de Oliveira Salazar, a professor of economics, was appointed as President of the Council of Ministers. Salazar quickly consolidated power and, in 1933, established the *Estado Novo* (New State). This corporatist and authoritarian regime was heavily inspired by conservative and autocratic ideologies. Salazar's rule was marked by strict control, censorship, and the suppression of political opposition. The *Estado Novo* aimed to restore order and financial stability after the chaos of the First Republic.

Salazar remained the dominant figure in Portuguese politics until 1968, when illness forced him to step down. His successor, Marcelo Caetano, attempted some limited

reforms, but the core of the authoritarian system remained. The *Estado Novo* era was also defined by Portugal's long and costly colonial wars in Africa, which became increasingly unpopular at home.

The deep-seated desire for change, coupled with the strain of the colonial wars, culminated in the Carnation Revolution on April 25, 1974. This military coup, carried out by the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), was remarkably peaceful, earning its name from the carnations placed in the soldiers' rifle barrels. The Carnation Revolution marked the end of the *Estado Novo* and initiated a rapid transition to democracy.

The revolution brought about significant changes, including the restoration of civil liberties, the release of political prisoners, and the dismantling of the authoritarian state's institutions. It also led to the decolonization of Portugal's African territories. The period immediately following the revolution was characterized by a degree of political and social effervescence, sometimes referred to as the Ongoing Revolutionary Process (PREC).

In 1975, a Constituent Assembly was elected to draft a new constitution. The resulting Constitution of 1976 established the Third Portuguese Republic, a democratic state based on the rule of law, popular sovereignty, and the separation of powers. This constitution, which has been amended several times since, remains the bedrock of Portugal's political system.

Since the adoption of the 1976 Constitution, Portugal has consolidated its democratic institutions and practices. The country has held regular multi-party elections, and power has transferred peacefully between different political forces. This period has seen the rise to prominence of the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) as the two dominant political forces.

Portugal's historical journey, from a centuries-old monarchy to an unstable republic, a long authoritarian period, and finally to a stable democracy, has profoundly shaped its political culture and institutions. The legacy of these experiences continues to influence the nation's political discourse and the development of its governance. The transition to democracy was a defining moment, and the subsequent decades have been a period of solidifying democratic norms and integrating Portugal more fully into the European and international community.

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