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*The role of the military in political transitions:  
from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day*

**XLIX International Congress of Military History**

1 - 6 September 2024, Lisbon

## Volume II





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# PORTUGUESE APRIL 25<sup>TH</sup>, 1974, MILITARY COUP

*Pedro de AVILLEZ (Portugal)*

## **The Aftermath of the April 25, 1974 Coup and Its Broader Implications**

The April 25, 1974 coup had enduring implications not only for Portugal but also for the global geopolitical landscape, particularly in the context of decolonization and the Cold War. The overthrow of the Estado Novo regime, often referred to as the Carnation Revolution, marked the end of one of Europe's longest-standing authoritarian governments and initiated a rapid decolonization process. This transition significantly altered the political dynamics of Lusophone Africa and influenced broader global trends toward the decolonization of European empires.

## **Decolonization and Its Consequences**

In the wake of the coup, Portugal's new political leadership prioritized the decolonization of its African territories, including Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe. These territories, which had been under Portuguese control for centuries but, like it has happened in other colonial territories in Africa, were experiencing growing nationalist movements and armed insurgencies. The rapid transfer of power to local insurgent groups led to political instability and, in many cases, violent civil conflicts. For instance, Angola's independence in 1975 quickly devolved into a protracted civil war involving various factions, some supported by the United States and South Africa, and others by the Soviet Union and Cuba, reflecting the broader ideological struggle of the Cold War.

The decolonization of Mozambique similarly led to internal strife. The Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) assumed power but faced resistance from the Mozambique

National Resistance (RENAMO), a conflict that would last for decades. In Guinea-Bissau, the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of Portuguese colonial authorities led to frequent internal political disputes and struggles for control.

These conflicts had a significant impact on regional stability, resulting in large-scale population displacement, economic hardship, and humanitarian crises. The legacy of Portuguese abrupt decolonization, combined with Cold War geopolitics, shaped the post-independence trajectories of these nations, leaving enduring challenges related to governance, economic development, and social cohesion.

## **Political Transformation in Portugal**

Domestically, the Carnation Revolution catalyzed a profound political transformation within Portugal. The transition from authoritarianism to democracy involved significant political and social upheaval. Initially, the country experienced a period of revolutionary fervor marked by widespread strikes, land occupations, and the nationalization of key industries and banks. These actions were driven by various leftist groups, including the well organized Communist Party (PCP), which sought to reshape Portugal's political and economic landscape according to marxist socialist principles.

However, internal divisions within the Army's 'control institution' created by the Revolution (the MFA), and the broader political spectrum, led to intense power struggles. The failed communist coup of November 25, 1975, underscored the tensions between different ideological revolutionary factions all aiming various political orders, with the determination of moderate forces in the MFA, determined to organize elections for a National Constituent Assembly, and to establish of a Democratic Constitution. The determined military intervention by the 'Group of Nine', Members of the Revolution Council, immediately in reaction to the tentative Communist November 25th coup, mobilized the Republic's President support, and prevented the establishment of a one-party socialist state, setting the stage for the consolidation of a multi-party democratic system.

The subsequent establishment of a Constituent Assembly in 1976 marked a pivotal moment in Portugal's political evolution. The new constitution, ratified that year, enshrined democratic principles, civil liberties, and political pluralism. It also reflected the aspirations of a society emerging from nearly five decades of authoritarian rule. The constitution guaranteed fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of speech, assembly, and association, and laid the foundation for democratic institutions that have remained stable for nearly five decades.

## **Economic and Social Changes**

The transition to democracy also brought significant economic and social changes. Portugal's integration into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986 (which later became the European Union) was a crucial factor in its economic modernization and development. EEC membership provided access to new markets, increased foreign investment, and structural funds that facilitated infrastructure development and economic diversification. These changes contributed to improved standards of living, accelerated reductions in poverty, and the expansion of social welfare programs.

However, the economic transition was not without challenges. The immediate post-revolutionary period saw economic instability, high inflation, and unemployment due to nationalization policies and industrial disruptions. The shift to a market economy required structural reforms and adjustments that impacted various sectors of Portuguese society. Despite these difficulties, Portugal's commitment to democratic governance and economic integration with Europe laid the groundwork for long-term stability and growth.

## **The Legacy of the Carnation Revolution**

The Carnation Revolution remains a significant chapter in Portugal's history and a symbol of the country's commitment to democracy and social justice. The peaceful nature of the coup, characterized by minimal violence and the widespread support of the population, has been celebrated as a model for democratic transitions. The revolution's legacy is evident in Portugal's enduring democratic institutions, its active role in the European Union, and its contributions to international peacekeeping and diplomatic efforts.

Moreover, the events of April 25, 1974, and November 25th 1975, have left a lasting impact on Portuguese cultural and national identity. The revolution is commemorated annually, reflecting a national ethos that values freedom, democracy, and human rights. It also serves as a reminder of the complex historical processes that shaped modern Portugal, from colonial ambitions and authoritarianism to decolonization and democratization.

## **Conclusion**

The military coup of April 25, 1974, was a watershed moment in both Portuguese and global history. It marked the end of an authoritarian regime, brought political liberty, initiated the decolonization of Portuguese territories and set Portugal on a path toward democracy and European integration. While the transition was fraught with challenges, including economic instability, destruction of most of the country's large industrial societies, and long political conflicts, the successful establishment of a democratic system, after the failure of the tentative November Communist Party

Coup, has had lasting positive effects on the country's development. The Carnation Revolution's legacy continues to influence Portugal's political and cultural landscape, underscoring the importance of democratic values and human rights in shaping the nation's identity and its role in the international community, and in the construction of an European United society.

### **Author's short CV**

Pedro Soares Franco de Avillez was born in Lisbon in 1941. Holds a Master's degree in Political Science from Sciences-Po (Paris University), a Doctorate in Economic Sociology from E.P.H.E. (Sorbonne), a post-graduation in Public Administration from E.N.A. (French Government institution).

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