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SCAPEGOATS OF AN ABORTED DECOLONIZATION? THE PORTUGUESE MILITARY IN EAST TIMOR IN 1974-75

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Abstract

If we give credit to the various surveys and opinion studies carried out between 1978 and 2004, the decolonization process that took place in 1974-76 in the former “Portuguese Ultramar” was as one of the aspects of the 25th of April Revolution most negatively evaluated by Portuguese public opinion. Several factors may explain this outcome, but one of them was certainly the persistence of a critical discourse about the loss of empire, often formulated in an emotional and even violent language.

The relevance that the African territories acquired in this context is well known. But the role of East Timor, the most remote of the Portuguese colonies, in the construction of this “cursed memory” of decolonization has perhaps been less examined. Still, in the early days of Portugal’s democratic consolidation, a very hostile narrative on the role played by the Portuguese military in Timor, engulfed in a civil war in 1975 and then occupied by Indonesia, made its way. Against this backdrop, the article will review some of the controversies that unfolded in the Portuguese public sphere in the late 1970s/early 1980s. The article suggests that a full understanding of the perceptions constructed about the events which took place in East Timor can only be achieved through an entangled analysis of the controversies raised by the “revolutionary” role of the Portuguese Armed Forces Movement in 1974-75, *both* in the metropole and in the overseas territories.

Keywords: East Timor; Portuguese Carnation Revolution; Armed Forces, Decolonization

The paper here presented results from a research project which is about to take-off in the Institute of Contemporary History (New University of Lisbon), coordinated by my colleague Zélia Pereira, and myself - *Auditing Decolonization in Timor-Leste, 1974-82: the Riscado Report*. It is funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology and the structure created by the Portuguese government to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution of 1974. It should therefore be read as a preliminary foray into the topic.

The cursed memory of decolonization

Besides commemorating the end of authoritarian rule and the advent of democracy and notions of social justice attuned with the European social model, Portugal is taking the opportunity to reflect upon the end of colonialism and the ensuing decolonization process. In some ways, this has been a less consensual legacy of the revolution. Indeed, one can even say that decolonization has been a kind of “ugly duckling” of the country’s transition to democracy.

The perceptions of many Portuguese about such an event, as far as we can gauge from several surveys and opinion polls taken between the late 1970s and 2004, were quite negative, not only about the way it all unfolded, but also about some of its consequences – even if the same polls revealed a general agreement with the end of the wars in Africa (Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique) and a sense of inevitability regarding the parting of ways with the former colonies.⁽¹⁾

In current political debates, there has never been a shortage of derogatory references to the decolonization process and lately this has been accentuated with the emergence of a far-right party (*Chega*) that espouses a historical discourse about the dictatorship and Portuguese colonial rule that can be considered as downright revisionist.

Assuming that most of the readers are sufficiently familiar with the troubled dissolution of the Portuguese empire in 1974-75, this paper will skip some of its milestones and pivotal moments⁽²⁾. It will be enough to remember that *decolonization* was, precisely, the first of the slogans (the others being *democratization* and *development*) of the triad of the Armed Forces Movement Program (AFM or MFA in its Portuguese acronym), the structure created by the middle ranking Portuguese officers (mostly captains and majors) to overthrow the dictatorship of Marcelo Caetano, something that reflected the sense of urgency which many attributed to the end of the armed conflicts in Africa.

1. Carlos Maurício “A Guerra Colonial e a Descolonização vistas pelas Sondagens de Opinião (1973-2004)”, *Nação & Defesa* 130 (2011): 267-295.

2. A good introduction for the English language reader is Norrie MacQueen, *The Decolonization of Portuguese Africa. Metropolitan Revolution and the Dissolution of Empire* (London: Longman, 1997). For a shorter one, see Pedro Aires Oliveira, “Decolonization in Portuguese Africa.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. 24 May. 2017; Accessed 8 Jan. 2025. <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-41>.

The achievement of such a goal was relatively quick, notwithstanding the fundamental differences between some of the key protagonists of the revolutionary process in Portugal. Just three months after the 25th of April coup d'État, even the champion of a "neo-colonial" solution to the imperial crisis, General António de Spínola, had accepted the idea that Portugal ran the risk of paying a very high price if it persisted in delaying the granting of independence to its overseas populations.

However, the euphoria experienced with the announcement of Law 7/74, which effectively recognized the right to independence of the peoples of the colonies, and allowed for the cessation of military hostilities, soon gave way to a mood of greater scepticism. This was largely due to a few events, all of them well known, but most significantly: the derailment of the process of transition to independence in Angola, and the outbreak of a civil war there among three warring factions, followed by the involvement of Cuba, South Africa, and (indirectly) the two superpowers; the arrival in the metropole of more than half a million Portuguese citizens from Angola and Mozambique in the course of 1975 and 1976 (the so-called returnees or *retornados*, the Portuguese equivalent to the French *pieds noirs* from Algeria)⁽³⁾; and the dramatic vicissitudes of the situation in East Timor (again, a scenario of civil war between rival groups), of which I will come to in a moment.

The possibility of the returnees' misfortunes becoming a factor in the growth of a revanchist sentiment, and the consequential expansion of the right, worried left-wing organizations, and particularly the Partido Socialista (Socialist Party - PS), which in the 1976 general elections took the trouble to produce a leaflet entitled *Portuguese: don't give in to demagoguery, enlighten yourself about decolonization*, in which it was lamented that "politically conservative forces" were "demagogically using the plight of refugees and decolonization in general" to discredit the PS and its leading figures.⁽⁴⁾

The very hostile discourse against decolonization focused, as might be expected, on the end of the empire in Africa. The reasons are easy to understand and include, for example: the dramatic circumstances of the *retornados* arrival, as well as the difficulties that many faced in rebuilding their lives in Portugal in the coming years (notwithstanding the support received by several state bodies); a whole batch of unresolved questions, financial and other, related to Portuguese material interests in Africa which could not be solved during the hastily negotiated independence agreements; the political evolution of African territories themselves, with the triumph of regimes supported by, or aligned

3. On this topic, see: Elsa Peralta (ed.), *The Retornados from the Portuguese colonies in Africa. Memory, Narrative, and History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); and Kalter, Christoph, *Postcolonial People. The Return from Africa and the Remaking of Portugal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

4. Fundação Mário Soares e Maria Barroso /Fundo AMS - Arquivo Mário Soares, Centro de Documentação do PS, "Português: Não Cedas à Demagogia Esclarece-te Sobre a Descolonização" (1976). Accessible in: <http://www.casacomum.org/cc/visualizador?pasta=02616.010.003> (accessed on 2024-9-3).

with, the Soviet Union and some of its closest allies (Cuba and several Eastern European powers), at a time of enormous ideological polarization in Portugal.

The political debacle in East Timor

However, I would say that one of the key components in the gradual emergence of a “cursed memory” of decolonization was also the extremely negative perception of the events that unfolded in East Timor, especially in 1975, which for reasons of space I will not be able to summarize here.⁽⁵⁾

Let me just remark that in Timor the Portuguese tried somehow to replicate their formula of transferring power to local nationalist forces in the context of a political process that contemplated competitive elections, but were not able to prevent the outbreak of lethal disagreements between some of them – just like in Angola, where three political factions began fighting with each other before the constitutional elections could take place. The indigenous units of the colonial army in Timor were disbanded and at some point, the Governor, a brigadier from the Portuguese army, Mário Lemos Pires, decided to withdraw to Ataúro, an offshore island next to Dili, and wait for the repatriation of his staff, troops and a few colonial officials. On 7 December 1975, Indonesia invaded the territory invoking reasons of national security, since the party who had attained power in Dili, the Revolutionary Front of Independent Timor-Leste (FRETILIN), was accused by the military in Jakarta of being communist oriented⁽⁶⁾.

Regarding Timor, the concerns in the metropole were not so much caused by the misfortunes of the settlers, as these were insignificant in number, but fundamentally by matters related to the disintegration of authority and the loss of the army’s “honour”, as well as by the disregard of a sense of historical responsibility vis-à-vis a predominantly Catholic population, the East Timorese, that had great misgivings about a possible absorption by Indonesia, a country known for managing the autonomous aspirations of its very diverse populations with a very heavy hand.

A striking feature of much of the literature and polemics produced in the context of the “blame assignment” related to events in Timor is the similitude in the type of language and content of the charges brought against the Portuguese military, and equivalent controversies concerning the unravelling of the civil war in Angola, or other episodes of chaos and violence which punctuated the Portuguese departure from other African territories. Indeed, many of those testimonies were suffused with terms such as “crime”, “irresponsibility”, “abandonment”, and “betrayal”.

5. For a useful overview see: Feijó, Rui Graça, and Zélia Pereira, “Decolonization without Self-Determination?: Portuguese Perspectives on Indonesia’s Involvement with Timor (1974–1975)”, *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 179, 2 (2023): 216–245, as well as the author’s volume *Timor-Leste. Do Colonialismo Tardio à Independência* (Porto: Afrontamento, 2023).

6. See Brad Simpson, “‘Illegally and Beautifully’: The United States, the Indonesian Invasion of East Timor and the International Community, 1974–76.” *Cold War History* 5, 3 (2005): 281–315.

One of the most informed critics of the conduct of the revolutionary leadership in Lisbon and some of its agents in Timor was a man who would become an eminent figure in Portuguese historiography – Luiz Filipe Thomaz (b. 1942), a leading scholar in the study of the Portuguese overseas expansion in Asia.

Thomaz had a particular relation with the deposed Caetano regime, which I cannot now detail (he was the nephew of the President of the Republic, Américo Thomaz, the symbol of the *ultra* faction of the late Estado Novo) and had completed a military commission in Timor in 1971-72, as a volunteer. He gained first-hand knowledge of the territory and its political and social realities and was able to build a network of informants in the military, ecclesiastical, administrative and student circles that kept him well informed of political developments there after the overthrow of the dictatorship in Lisbon.

I would even risk saying that his articles from 1975, published in newspapers like *O Dia* (a right-wing daily), were instrumental in creating a kind of “standard” narrative about the responsibilities for what had gone wrong in East Timor in the months before the Indonesian invasion. If we want to reduce this version to an essential idea, it goes as follows: the AMF, sometimes acting on its own and sometimes playing the role of the “useful idiots” of sinister, foreign forces (i.e., international communism), had fuelled divisions among the Timorese and given the Indonesian military the pretext to carry out a pre-emptive intervention to forestall the advent of a communist “subversion” in a neighbouring territory.

According to Thomaz, the AFM had made the blunder of remedying “the state of political minority in which centuries-old paternalism had kept the population of Timor” with an intensive politicization along the lines of similar campaigns carried out by the radical elements of the AFM (the Fifth Division of the General Staff) in the centre-north rural areas of Portugal (the so-called “Cultural Dynamitization Campaigns”, which drew inspiration from some of the hearts-and-minds operations waged by colonial army in Africa). The second error of the “progressive” elements of the AFM was to have dismantled not only “para-fascist” or typically colonial structures, “but all the foundations of public authority before there was a democratically structured power to replace it.”

These initiatives, carried out by members of the staff of Governor Mário Lemos Pires⁽⁷⁾, ran simultaneously with other measures, such as the alleged favouritism towards FRETILIN, the local equivalent of the Marxist-oriented Luso-African liberation movements, the replacement of traditional chiefs by “disreputable” administrative ad hoc commissions, or the “destruction of the means of coercion and deterrence that the power possessed.”⁽⁸⁾

7. Most notably majors Francisco Mota and Silvério Jonatas, who represented the AFM in East Timor and therefore enjoyed a special status within Lemos Pires' cabinet.

8. All quotations from Luís Filipe Thomaz, *Timor, Autópsia de uma Tragédia* (Lisboa: Ed. do Autor, 1977). See also Luís Filipe Thomaz, *País dos Belos. Achegas para a Compreensão de Timor-Leste* (Lisboa: Instituto Português do Oriente e

Thomaz described the governor as a moderate, but hesitant individual, whose authority had been greatly diminished by the fact that he was perceived as being too close to the then “disgraced” general Spínola, who after Lemos Pires’ appointment in late 1974 had become one of the symbols of the counter-revolution in Portugal. His articles provided numerous episodes that underlined the idea of a complete disintegration of Portuguese authority, including the desertion of two indigenous companies which ended up joining one of the Timorese factions, namely the Timorese Democratic Union (*UDT*).

Despite the scarce news coverage that these events received in Portugal, there were still information channels that enabled certain figures to bring the situation in Timor to the political spotlight, and hence to Portugal’s Constituent Assembly, elected after the first democratic elections of April 1975. Two of them were the MPs Carlos Candal, from the PS, and Ângelo Correia, from the Partido Social Democrata (PSD, centre-right), who gave speeches on Timor on the session of September 3, 1975.

Correia, who had also completed a military commission in Timor before the 25th of April, was particularly forceful, accusing the leftwing military of pushing Timor into a political abyss. Correia also had no doubts in highlighting the parallels between the anarchic political situation in the metropole (this was the height of the far left’s ascendancy in Portugal’s revolutionary process) and events in Timor – they should be seen as two sides of the same coin:

“Military insubordination, disrespect for the hierarchy and other internal rules of the armed forces, much of this occurred in Timor, leading to abuses, confrontations with civilians that foreshadowed ominous forms of coexistence, as it turned out. (...) The AMF did not have the right to export the spirit of the 5th Division to Timor. And for two reasons: first, because this spirit is not the spirit of the Portuguese people; second, because it is not the spirit of the armed forces”.⁽⁹⁾

In the following years, the issue of Timor continued to be discussed in the public sphere of post-revolutionary Portugal.

The barbaric behaviour of the Indonesian occupiers began to be fully appreciated and widely condemned, but the responsibilities of the military remained a recurring theme in Portuguese discussions of the decolonization period. The first elected President, general António Ramalho Eanes, would take the decision to order an inquiry into the conduct of the Armed Forces in Timor, by a military commission headed by brigadier Francisco Riscado, which would result in a report, completed in 1977, but which was kept secret for another 4 years given the sensitive nature of some of its findings (the

Fundação Oriente, 2008). Some of Thomaz’s allegations would later find a strong rebuttal by general António Martins Barrento, a member of Lemos’ Pires staff. See his *Olho do Furacão: o fim do fim, Timor*. Lisboa. Fronteira do Caos, 2017.

9. Assembleia da República, *Os 25 Anos da «Questão de Timor-Leste» no Parlamento Português* – Volume 1 (Assembleia da República, 2000), 52.

workings of this commission, and the public impact of the report, are at the core of project mentioned in the opening of this paper)⁽¹⁰⁾.

The second irruption of the East Timor controversy

Nonetheless, the issue resurfaced in 1981.

There was, once again, an environment of some tension between part of the political class and the military. A constitutional review process was underway, initiated by the government of the Democratic Alliance (AD, centre-right), but with the support of the PS, which opened the way to the dissolution of the Revolutionary Council (an advisory body to the President, created in 1975 to oversee the fulfilment of some of the pledges of the revolutionary period) and the subordination of the armed forces to democratic political authority.⁽¹¹⁾ The entire debate had the effect of resurrecting controversial episodes of the revolution involving the AMF and the military left.

On October 7, 1981, RTP (Portuguese public broadcaster) aired a 50-minute reportage produced by its flagship news program *Grande Reportagem* (partially inspired on BBC's *Panorama*). The reportage recalled highly sensitive episodes for the military and was not shy in doing some finger pointing at politicians such as Mário Soares, Almeida Santos and Melo Antunes, decision-makers who were presented as having overseen the Timorese case in 1974-75. The PS's reaction in parliament was very lively, with several MPs making protests in defence of the "honour" of Soares and Santos. The heated discussions unleashed by the reportage would give pretext to the creation of the first parliamentary commission to follow the East Timor situation⁽¹²⁾.

A few weeks after the RTP emission, Portuguese newspapers were also reporting the latest developments of an affair that had erupted in late 1979 – a complaint of "high treason" filed by a group of ultra-right personalities, led by General Silvino Silvério Marques, a former colonial governor of Cape Verde and Angola and an open admirer of Salazar, on the assumption that all decisions pertaining to decolonization had violated the Penal Code (1886) that was still in force in 1974-75, which prohibited the "alienation, transfer or sale of any portion of the mother country", including the overseas territories.⁽¹³⁾

But what caught my attention in this new outbreak of discussions about the events in Timor was the abrasiveness of some commentators that could not be associated with the ultra-right. This is clear evidence that the behaviour of the "military left" during the

10. Governador Mário Lemos Pires, *Relatório do Governo de Timor. (Período de 13 de Novembro de 1974 a 7 de Dezembro de 1975)*, Lisboa, Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 1981; and Brigadeiro Francisco A. Riscado et. al., *Relatório da Comissão de Análise e Esclarecimento do Processo de Descolonização de Timor*, Lisboa, Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 1981.

11. David Castaño and Maria Inácia Rezola, *Conselho da Revolução 1975-1982. Uma biografia* (Lisboa: Edições 70, 2021).

12. J.M. Barata Feyo, *O Lado Invisível do Mundo* (Lisboa: Clube do Autor, 2021).

13. Silvino Silvério Marques et al., *Os Descolonizadores e o Crime de Traição à Pátria* (Lisboa, Ulisseia, 1983).

revolutionary period had opened wounds that had yet to be healed. A particular forceful commentator was Francisco Sousa Tavares (1920-1973), one of the most formidable polemicists of his time, an MP for the PSD, and someone who had always taken its distances vis-à-vis Salazar's colonial policies.

Being able to claim a past of personal opposition to the dictatorship, Sousa Tavares produced one of the most violent articles on the conduct of the military in Timor ever published – “A Honra que ficou Perdida” (*A Capital*, 9.10.1979). “Indecent crime” was the way he defined the actions of “propaganda agents dressed as officers of the Portuguese Army”. The word “treason” was also used generously, and his entire reading of the events closely followed the interpretation put forward by Luís Filipe Thomaz a few years before. “Dirty” and “dirt” were other expressions of choice.

Reasons of brevity prevent me from elaborating much on the content of these articles, but I would remark that they conveyed two fundamental impressions. Firstly, a feeling of sorrow at the “abandonment” of the East Timorese, whose cultural attachment to Portugal was for Sousa Tavares an undisputed truth. Secondly, the repudiation of the actions of what he saw as an army “subverted” by leftist “demagoguery” (“anarco-populism” was a favoured expression at the time), in the “Algerian or Peruvian way”, which for Sousa Tavares was one of the most unfortunate episodes of the 25th of April, and a major reason for the corrective movement of the 25th of November of 1975 – the *Thermidor* of the Portuguese revolution.⁽¹⁴⁾

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn at this point? Very briefly, I would say that the appraisal of decolonization quickly became a fertile ground for those who wanted to delegitimize the entire revolutionary process in 1975, presenting it as contrary to national interests and comparable to acts of treason – a language that we can also find in other contexts of military defeat and/or imperial dissolution, both in post-World War I countries such as Germany and Austria, and in France during the last stages of the Algerian war in the 1960s. This perspective was not shared by the majority of public, which overwhelmingly adhered to the new democratic freedoms and was conscious of the nexus between the advent of democracy and the end of the colonial wars in Africa. But the seemingly anarchic transition from imperial rule to messy situations prior to agreed independence dates in places like Angola and Timor left a lasting mark in the collective perception of decolonization, whose endurance can be gauged from various surveys and opinion polls well into the early years of the 21st century. The end of empire became a battleground for the settling of scores against those who had performed important roles in this key event, with East Timor playing a significant part here.

14. All quotes from Francisco Sousa Tavares, *Escritos Políticos* (Porto: Editorial Figueirinhas, 1996), Vol. 2.

None the less, this arena was also populated by individuals who assumed a more understanding attitude towards decolonization, like Francisco Sousa Tavares, but were adamant to emphasize the “deleterious” influence of the populist left in the armed forces during the revolutionary process, and stress the need to bring Portugal’s democratization to its logical conclusion, which implied the swift dissolution of bodies such as the Council of the Revolution, populated by many leading figures of AMF, and the complete subordination of the armed forces to civilian democratic authority.

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