books & ideas.net

Portugal's revolution

Christophe Araújo

On April 25, 1974, a coup d'état led by young officers overthrew a nearly fifty-year old dictatorship in Portugal, inaugurating a revolutionary era. The historian Victor Pereira describes the origins and repercussions of this event—as well as its twists and turns, achievements, and doubts.

Reviewed: Victor Pereira, *C'est le peuple qui commande. La révolution des Œillets 1974-1976* (The People Rules: The Carnation Revolution, 1974-1976), Bordeaux, Éditions du Détour, 2024, 280 p., 21€90.

Twentieth-century Portugal was marked by a decisive event: the coup d'état of April 25, 1974, organized by insurgent military officers. In less than 24 hours, a forty-eight-year-old dictatorship collapsed. Compared to this long-lasting authoritarian regime, which existed for nearly 17,500 days, the night of the coup[1] seems miniscule. Yet it is the foundation of Portugal's current democracy. The fact that April 25 has, since 1975, been a holiday is proof that it represents a break with the past. In 2024, many academic and cultural events commemorated the coup's fiftieth anniversary.

This is the context in which Victor Pereira's book was published, alongside similar French publications.[2] An associate professor at the Université de Pau et des

[1] This is a paraphrase of the 2001 documentary *La Nuit du coup d'État -Lisbonne avril 1974* (The night of the coup: Lisbon, April 1974), directed by Ginette Lavigne. It focuses on one of the coup's key figures, Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho.

[2] See the concise but precise book by Yves Léonard, *Sous les œillets la révolution, Le 25 avril 1974 au Portugal,* Paris, Chandeigne, 2023, as well as Ugo Palheta's *Découvrir la révolution des Œillets, Portugal (1974-1975)*, Paris, Éditions sociales, 2024.

Pays de l'Adour, he is currently a scholar at the Institute for Contemporary History at NOVA University Lisbon. With Yves Léonard, he is one of the leading historians of twentieth-century Portugal in France. His book's title, *C'est le peuple qui commande. La révolution des Œillets 1974-1976* (The People Rules: The Carnation Revolution, 1974-1976), might seem surprising, but Pereira explains its meaning in the first chapter. The title is a translation of a verse--"*O povo é quem mais ordena"*--that is repeated three times in Zeca Afonso's song "Grândola Vila Morena," which was broadcast on Radio Renascença on April 25, 1974. This quote also supports one of Pereira's major claims: though the coup was initiated by the military, it was the people's participation in the uprising that, from the beginning, made it revolutionary.

A military vanguard?

Thanks to archives consulted in Portugal, France, and the United States, Pereira expands his focus beyond the coup itself, while Portuguese historiography tends to limit itself to how the event played out in Portugal. After a short introduction, the first two chapters work their way through the chronology to explain the causes of the coup, which relate primarily to the role of the military and the colonial question.

The military played a key role in establishing the dictatorship in 1926. While its influence varied throughout this period, it always fulfilled at minimum a symbolic function, as all presidents were chosen from its ranks. Even António de Oliveira Salazar, who was president of the council from 1932 to 1968, "realized that staying in power depended on the military" (p. 18). Because of decolonization, the military returned to center stage in the 1960s. At this time, the Portuguese empire, which occupied a central place in the dictatorship's rhetoric, was challenged by independence movements. The Portuguese government focused on defending the empire until it was lost. By emphasizing the empire from the moment his book begins, Pereira rightfully follows the historiographical trend that sees the empire as one of the dictatorship's pillars. Though they were forgotten in the 1980s and 90s, colonial studies grew in the 2000s, returning the empire to its crucial place in the dictatorship's history.

After the Goa debacle of 1961, the leadership decided to send the entire military and all conscripts – a total of 800,000 men (p. 33) – to Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. Though Marcelo Caetano replaced Salazar in 1968, generals like António de Spínola, who experienced varying degrees of success on the front,

proposed alternatives to the dead-end that the colonial wars had become. Some favored decolonization; others, like Spínola, a Portuguese commonwealth. Yet as Pereira notes in chapter two (entitled "The Foundry of April 25"), it was the military's middle ranks, consisting of young officers and particularly captains, who articulated the discontent. They hailed from the lower middle classes and "were sociologically fairly close to many ordinary soldiers" (p. 49). They believed that they knew the people. The Armed Forces Movement (MFA) was created in late 1973. Its program consisted of three "d's": democratize, decolonize, and develop. The military sprang into action on April 25, 1974, and was able to overthrow the regime.

The will of the people

By chapter three, Pereira begins to emphasize the important role played by the people. Though the insurgent officers asked the population to stay home, citizens disobeyed their instructions and came out in support. Their presence turned a coup into a revolution. The MFA officers claimed to embody the will of the people.

In chapter four, Pereira dwells on this transition to revolution, affirming the event's revolutionary character, a point that contemporary political discourse often avoids. He recalls that homes were occupied and strikes and demonstrations widespread. The country experienced an "explosion of joy" (p. 100). The Portuguese revolutionary movement triggered an upsurge of civic engagement, as seen in the creation of numerous political parties. The provisional government consisted of officers, but also civilians, including communists, despite the fear they elicited in Western countries. Popular resistance also meant a refusal to keep fighting in Africa and an acceleration of the decolonization process, which occurred from 1974 to 1975, despite the reticence of Spínola, who was now president. The MFA "emerged as the revolution's driving force" (p. 133), pressuring Spínola to resign in September 1974. Consequently, it was indeed the people--as embodied by the MFA--who ruled, as the government attempted, with varying degrees of success, to take its cues from Portugal's citizens.

Cracks in the revolution

The revolution's course was marked by many twists and turns, which Pereira examines in later chapters. Their titles call attention to the revolutionary movement's hesitations. Chapter five examines "Cracks" in the movement, while chapter six considers whether the revolution was trying to create "A European Cuba." After Spínola stepped down, demonstrators feared a reactionary countercoup and sought primarily to defend the revolution. The provisional government was divided over how to pursue it. A failed coup attempt by Spínola in March 1975 radicalized social movements and pushed the government further to the left. Yet the Constituent Assembly elections of April 25, 1975, in which turnout was 92%, left no doubt that the population supported the revolutionary movement and favored moderate parties, which came in first.[3]

Beginning in July 1975, far-left groups tried to accentuate the revolutionary process. They sought to create a socialist society, radicalize demands, and distribute wealth and land more equitably. At the other end of the political spectrum, the Catholic right became increasingly virulent in opposing far-left agitation. The different currents represented in the provisional government were divided, as the Portuguese living in Angola, fleeing the civil war, were forced to return to the metropole. While the economic situation and unemployment worsened, political tensions rose, particularly on the left. The far left lost credibility, however, after a failed coup on November 25, 1975. A backlash quickly followed: coup-plotters in the military were jailed, foreign agitators expelled (bringing revolutionary tourism to an end), and media outlets that learned too far to the left were taken over. At the same time, the Constituent National Assembly continued its work. A new constitution was approved in April 1976. Presidential and local elections took place without incident, confirming that democracy was here to stay, particularly as joining the European Economic Community became the horizon of Portuguese political life.

The book's conclusion assesses April 25' historical significance. The Portuguese people's attachment to April 25, 1975, and to the democracy to which it gave birth remain clear to this day. Yet as Portugal approaches the event's fiftieth anniversary, Pereira notes the growth in support for the far right, which openly criticizes April 25.

[3] From page 161 to 171, Pereira proposes an interesting analysis of voting by Portuguese who lived abroad and particularly debates on whether they should be allowed to vote.

A successful study

Pereira's book is an important stage in the diffusion in France of the history of the dictatorship's end and of the revolutionary period through to the democratic constitution's ratification. It provides access, in French, to an in-depth, rigorous, and detailed study of a period that, due to its richness, is complex and difficult to grasp. The sensible choice to present the Carnation Revolution chronologically allows readers to orient themselves more easily.

The introduction, which is a bit short, might have briefly discussed how studies of the Portuguese revolution have developed over time to better situate the book historiographically. Pereira might also have been more explicit about the approach he takes. Yet the book is persuasive in the way that it carefully blends multiple themes, which reflect the diversity of upheavals that the Carnation Revolution brought about. In this vein, Pereira offers a balanced assessment of April 25, 1974's political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, and social consequences. Without claiming to be exhaustive, the examples provided are convincing and always firmly supported by archival sources. More systematic reference to historiographical works (which are less cited) might have enriched the book's perspective and made it possible to compare different approaches.

Furthermore, comparison with other revolutionary situations would have been welcome and made it possible to go beyond Portugal's situation, particularly since, for the participants, other revolutions served as reference points. Similarly, it would have been interesting to say more about the international context, which was shaped by the economic downturn that followed the first oil crisis. Finally, Pereira might have paid more attention to international reactions to the Portuguese revolution, which he does not deal with extensively.

But addressing a brief but politically, economically, and socially intense period in a book of less than three hundred pages is a success in itself. Pereira's efforts at synthesis have paid off. His book clearly contributes to a better understanding of the political and social history of Portugal in the mid-seventies.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, October 10, 2024. Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, May 15, 2025