

PORTUGUESE OPT FOR A SHIFT AGNIESZKA ZIELIŃSKA, IBERIAN PENINSULA

After Spain, the Netherlands or Italy, Portugal is also turning to the right. To govern, the traditional center-right must align itself with a new far-right party. Its leader, a former sports commentator, refers to the tradition of Portuguese dictatorship.

The bomb exploded four months ago, and everything that has happened in Lisbon since then is a consequence. That day, November 7, in the early morning, the Portuguese media stopped broadcasting the tragic news from Israel and Gaza. Comments about the frontline in Ukraine also fell silent. Media was dominated exclusively by domestic news.

Freudian slip

That morning, Portuguese police entered several residences and government offices. In one, they found cash:

75,000 euros hidden in books, the origin of which the library's owners could not explain. As a result of the search, five people were detained, including the head of the office of then-Prime Minister António Co- sty. As soon as the prosecutor's office placed him under investigation for abuse of power and corruption, the head of government almost immediately tendered his resignation. Thus, after less than two years in office, the Socialist Cabinet collapsed.

The case is not a trivial one: some of the detainees come from the political circles around the now 66-year-old former Socialist Prime Minister José Sócrates, the incumbent, who was arrested between 2005 and 2011, and on whom corruption suspicions have long weighed heavily.

Also connected with Sócrates is a certain "Freudian" slip: while reporting on the November arrests, CNN TV for a moment gave an information on the so-called strip: "The detainees will testify for 48 years." The word "years" was quickly replaced with "hours" (two days is the period for which a citizen can be detained without a court order). But on this occasion, memories of the past returned in many Portuguese. After all, the former prime minister Sócrates has been awaiting his trial, or perhaps just the statute of limitations, for more than a decade now.

Two more mandates

When Prime Minister Costa resigned, the premier refused to appoint another Socialist candidate - and decided to call early elections. These were held on Sunday, March 10, and the result is clear: after eight years of Socialist Party rule, the Portuguese people have opted for the right.

The center-right coalition, going by the name of the Democratic Alliance (AD), won. This bloc, led by 51-year-old Luís Montenegro, the leader of the Social Democratic Party (somewhat contrary to its name, it has a profile of a Christian and Conservative), won over 29.5 percent of support. Just behind it with a score of 28.5 percent was the

Socialist Party (PS). In parliament, this will likely mean a two-seat difference between the two main factions.

- It is surprising how quickly the Socialists conceded defeat and declared themselves an opposition party. The difference is, after all, only those two mandates. Although it would have been difficult, but the Socialist Party could have at least attempted to form a government in coalition with other leftist groups, says Dr. Miguel Moniz, an anthropologist at the Institute of Social Sciences in Lisbon, in an interview with the Weekly.

"The Portuguese people have chosen Change," Luís Montenegro wrote on Platform X (the former Twitter). Although he is still well short of an absolute majority of 116 seats, Montenegro already sees himself as prime minister.

The right wing is growing in strength

The fly in the ointment in the future parliament may turn out to be the third - the Chega party (which means "Enough" in Portuguese). This anti-system and far-right formation was established five years ago. It started with one mandate, and after three years could already count on twelve.

Today, it can bring as many as 48 deputies into parliament. Preliminary results show that Chega got the best result in the popular tourist region of Faro district.

Chega has been speaking out against immigration, Muslims, and the LGBTQ community, although recently it has raised anti-corruption slogans in particular. This is hitting fertile ground, as politicians with ties to the previous ruling camp are under suspicion of corruption in so-called green hydrogen and lithium projects (Portugal is Europe's largest supplier of this rare metal, which is used in the production of batteries, among other things).

Chega party leader, 41-year-old lawyer and former sports commentator André Ventura, proclaims that it will severely punish corruption, as well as fight crime, which he blames largely on the Roma. In the campaign, he said he would lock Roma in special camps.

- Chega is more anti-Roma than anti-immigrant. Its politicians blame the Roma minority for their lack of assimilation, living on benefits from the state and crime, says political scientist Dr. João Carvalho of the Center for Research and Sociological Studies (CIES-ISCTE) at the Lisbon University Institute in an interview with the Weekly.

Miguel Moniz, on the other hand, believes that Chega is an opportunist party. - It was not conceived as a ruling party. Its goal is to pursue outrage and demagoguery, it is its strategy calculated primarily to win elections, not what comes after, the anthropologist says.

A parade of problems

In addition to corruption, an important reason for dissatisfaction in society is taxes. Portugal has one of the highest tax burdens in the European Union, which is why André

Ventura presented himself during the election campaign almost as an incarnation of Javier Milei, the liberal president of Argentina, promising to radically reduce state entitlements.

However, according to 61-year-old José, an entrepreneur from Lisbon, the problem in Portugal is not only high taxes, but also their instability. - We can't have financial plans or budget well, because taxes can change throughout the year. When this happens in a short period of time, we can't prepare for it and we are already lost ourselves," a pre-entrepreneur tells me.

Another really pressing problem in Portugal is the lack of housing.

- The minimum salary is almost the same as the average, and with such earnings we will never be able to afford to buy our own apartment," he says in an interview.

Cláudia Aragão, 29, a freelancer living in the Canary Islands, talks to "Tygodnik". The lack of new housing and the influx of people from abroad, especially retirees who invest in real estate, means that the average Portuguese cannot afford not only to buy an apartment, but even to rent one. The minimum salary in Portugal is 700 euros. Real estate prices are skyrocketing, as available apartments, especially those in big cities, are rented out to tourists.

In addition to the stagnation of the housing market, the Socialists' defeat in the elections was also influenced by the high prices of food products, including olive oil, a key ingredient in Portuguese cuisine.

- We don't have an economic crisis or high unemployment, but the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have caused the power of money to decline. Portuguese people are working as much as before, but they can no longer buy as many products with it as before. Many have trouble making it to the end of the month," says political scientist Carvalho.

The long shadow of corruption

"For me, a leader is important," says José. - I voted for someone who seems transparent to me, because with the recent corruption scandals we need responsible politicians in power.

The entrepreneur believes that there are corruption suspects in almost every Portuguese party. In the past six months alone, politicians from both major parties have been investigated for corruption. The collapse of the Socialist government of António Costa, his inclusion in the investigation and the detention of several people from his inner circle is one of these scandals. Another involves Social Democratic Party politicians. Less than two months ago, the president of Madeira's regional government, Miguel Albuquerque, was charged with corruption and abuse of power.

- Our judicial system is based on the principle of checks and balances, and this means that wealthy individuals can appeal decisions from one court to the next all the time. Therefore, complicated corruption cases never end in a verdict," believes João Carvalho.

The political scientist recalls a case involving one former minister who was facing serious corruption charges. - They failed to convict him, so he still receives a state

pension. This has caused a great deal of outrage among Portuguese people," says Carvalho.

Young people vote for Chega

Portugal's turn to the right is part of a European trend, also observed in Spain, the Netherlands or Italy.

Anthropologist Miguel Moniz believes that this does not yet necessarily mean that Portugal is turning to the extreme right, but it is evidence that society is reacting to the political crisis and corruption scandals. "What concerns me, however, is that young people in Portugal are increasingly open to right-wing politics. Time will tell whether this is also a reaction to the political crisis or a deeper change in Portuguese politics," says Moniz.

It is also a fact that the Chega leader is extremely active on social media, especially on Tik-Tok and Instagram, which makes it easier for him to reach the youngest voters, who are also eager to use these sites in Portugal.

Characteristically, a significant portion of previously undecided voters also voted for Chega. Hence, Portugal had the highest turnout in the March elections in 30 years: more than 66 percent of eligible voters cast their votes.

Don't vote, don't complain

Among the latter is Cláudia Aragão, the aforementioned resident of Spain's Canary Islands. She already cast her vote by mail a week before the election. Although she is amazed that only six deputies are elected with the votes of Portuguese émigrés, she couldn't imagine not voting.

- My grandmother always told me that it was important. She said it was important for us to exercise our rights well. If we don't vote, we don't have the right to complain," says Cláudia, who voted for the small environmentalist Livre party. "Yes, I knew that Livre would not play a big role in this election, but on almost all issues I agree with them," she justifies her choice.

Although Livre won only a little over 3 percent of the vote and four seats, it still improved its score compared to the last election.

There will be as many as eight parties in the new parliament. In addition to the center-right Social Democrats (79 seats), the Socialists (77 seats) and the ultra-right Chega (48 seats), the unicameral Assembly of the Republic will include eight more parliamentarians from the center-right Liberal Initiative, five from the Left Bloc, four from the Democratic Coalition, four from Livre and one from the ecological party PAN.

Half a century of the carnation revolution

What are the chances of forming a government with such a constellation? In order to gain a majority, the Democratic Alliance will need the votes of the far right. The Chega leader has made no secret of his governmental aspirations; nor has he hidden the price the Alliance will have to pay for his support. On the other hand, its leader Luís

Montenegro has repeatedly denied on camera that he will form a government together with Chega. If they fail to reach an agreement, it could mean that the country faces another election within six months.

Meanwhile, in less than a month Portugal will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution and the fall of authoritarian rule. In Portugal, it has the face of António Salazar, who held the office of prime minister - actually dictator - for a long 36 years (1932-68). Six years after his era ended, a military coup - just called the Carnation Revolution - ousted his successor and restored democracy.

During the 2022 campaign, the Chega leader directly alluded to Salazar's words in his slogan "God, homeland, family and work."

Anthropologist Miguel Moniz believes that the near future calls for vigilance, as democracy in Portugal is still quite young.



MIGUEL MONIZ, an anthropologist, believes that by voting for the far right, people are responding to political crisis and corruption scandals.