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CASE STUDY

January 2025



Carnation Revolution

*The military and the
transition to democracy*

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INTRODUCTION

On 25 April 1974, Portugal, Europe's last colonial empire, took an unprecedented step towards democracy thanks to a peaceful coup d'état orchestrated by the Armed Forces Movement (MFA). Nicknamed the 'Carnation Revolution' because of the red flowers worn by the soldiers, this transition to democracy has left its mark on modern history for its peaceful nature and its rejection of violence.

Yet this success was based on deep-seated tensions that had been simmering for decades. While the Salazarist regime, in power since 1933, kept the country in a state of economic and social stagnation, the colonial wars in Africa weighed heavily on the national finances and exacerbated frustrations among both the civilian population and the army. Brutal repression by the secret police, the PIDE, stifled all opposition, but at the same time fuelled clandestine resistance and critical thinking, particularly among the military.

The Carnation Revolution raises a number of questions: to what extent can this unique event be considered a successful exception among the democratic transitions initiated by an army in the twentieth century?

This study sets out to examine the structural causes that led to the revolution, the central role played by the army in its unfolding and the lessons that this episode offers for understanding the dynamics of democratic transitions. Through an analysis of the colonial and economic context, military mobilisation and post-revolutionary political management

we seek to identify the elements that made this revolution a singular and inspiring historical moment.



Official photo of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, Prime Minister of Portugal (1968)

I. AN ANACHRONISTIC COLONIAL CONTEXT IN EUROPE AND AN ECONOMY IN CRISIS

Portugal, under the Salazarist and later the Caetanist dictatorship, was one of the last European states to maintain an extensive colonial empire, which in Africa included the following territories: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe. These colonies were the scene of particularly brutal wars of independence, in which Portuguese forces employed repressive tactics including the use of napalm, as in Guinea-Bissau. These conflicts, which spanned more than a decade (1961-1974), exhausted Portugal's human and financial resources and reinforced the regime's international isolation.

This military violence was compounded

by a deep economic stagnation. The dictatorship, in place since 1933 under António de Oliveira Salazar and then Marcelo Caetano, kept the country in a state of chronic poverty. Despite relative economic growth in the 1960s thanks to industrialisation (limited) and emigration (massive), a large part of the population remained rural, illiterate and marginalised. Political and economic isolation, exacerbated by international sanctions, reinforced the impression that the regime was obsolete and out of touch with modern aspirations. This lack of access to education and information was a tool for controlling the regime, but also a brake on modernisation.

This double crisis, colonial and economic, was prolonged by a climate of repression that stifled any desire for change.



Workers and soldiers joined forces during the Portuguese revolution of 1974.

II. UNE RÉPRESSION QUI CATALYSE LE MÉCONTENTEMENT

The regime was based on systematic repression orchestrated by the PIDE (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado). This secret police carried out campaigns of surveillance, arbitrary imprisonment and torture against dissidents, including intellectuals, students, workers and soldiers opposed to the war. However, this repression contributed to the emergence of underground movements, including opposition parties such as the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and trade union networks.

The colonial wars, perceived as hopeless conflicts, fuelled deep disenchantment among the military.

Junior officers, who were often educated and from the lower middle classes, found themselves faced with a war that they considered morally and strategically untenable.

Antonio de Spínola, Governor of Guinea-Bissau, acted as a catalyst by publishing *Portugal and the Future* (1974), in which he argued for a political solution to the colonial problem. Although this book led to his being sidelined, his ideas provided food for thought for the young officers of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), who were convinced that only a radical break with the past could save the country. These internal cracks in the army were soon to develop into a real breakaway movement, giving rise to the *Movimento das Forças armadas* (MFA).

III. LE RÔLE DÉCISIF DE L'ARMÉE DANS LA TRANSITION

On 25 April 1974, the MFA, made up of a core group of young officers, launched a military coup that overthrew the regime without any notable violence. The revolution was immediately supported by the civilian population, tired of decades of repression and misery.

The signal

The initial signal for the uprising was disconcertingly simple: the broadcast of the revolutionary song (Grândola, Vila Morena) on public radio at dawn, thanks to an accomplice on the air. This apparently innocuous gesture was in fact carefully planned: it allowed the insurgent units to synchronize without arousing the suspicions of the authorities. The symbolism of the song - celebrating equality and fraternity - also fitted in perfectly with the story to come.

Carnation Revolution - the military and the transition to democracy



Celebration in Lisbon, April 25, 1974.

Taking key and strategic points

From the very outset, the MFA rebels seized a series of strategic locations in Lisbon: the airport, national television, the central bank, and Praça do Comércio, where the main state institutions are located. This strategy of territorial control both paralyzed the reaction of the authorities and projected an image of determined force. By occupying these places, the revolutionaries also ensured control of the narrative: as soon as it was seized, the national television station was used to broadcast messages calling on the population to remain calm, while legitimizing the action of the MFA

Civilians follow in the footsteps of the military

The occupation of Praça do Comércio in the early hours of April 25th marked a visual and political rupture: the authoritarian state no longer reigned there, and the public space suddenly became that of the people. Very quickly, hundreds, then thousands of civilians converged there, drawn by rumors of an uprising. This popular, spontaneous and joyful occupation amplified the revolutionary dynamic.

The military uniform was both an asset and a risk. Nothing distinguished the insurgent soldiers from the loyalists: same equipment, same ranks, same language: the risk of misunderstanding was immense. On several occasions, units faced each other, weapons at the ready, without knowing whether they were allies or enemies.

This is where the insurgent leaders' negotiating skills and composure played a decisive role. In a situation where a simple order to fire could have plunged the country into civil war, restraint was a lifesaver.

The civilians did not just observe: they applauded the soldiers, chanted slogans for freedom, offered the military water and food, and discussed politics in the streets. Handmade signs, flags, and songs began to emerge, transforming the square into a place of collective affirmation. The visible support of the people gave the MFA decisive moral weight, reinforcing their legitimacy and discouraging hesitation in the loyalist ranks. The street thus became a full-fledged player in the revolution.

The symbol of carnations, which became a global emblem of the Portuguese revolution, was born of a spontaneous gesture. In a restaurant in the center of Lisbon, a young waitress, Celeste Caeiro, was handing out red flowers to MFA soldiers who were passing by the establishment; she was in fact giving them what she had on hand: carnations that had originally been intended for a birthday celebration that was canceled because of the uprising. Moved by this peaceful gesture, the soldiers slipped the flowers into the barrels of their guns. Very quickly, the florists in the neighborhood and passers-by followed suit, and the streets of Lisbon were covered in red.



Mural painted in 2014, 40 years after the Carnation Revolution, in Lisbon, Portugal

IV. THE REVERSE SYSTEM WITHOUT A SHOT FIRED

Poker

A central figure of the 25th of April, Captain Salgueiro Maia embodied this revolution without violence. At dawn, he woke up his 240 men in Santarém, convinced them in a few words and led them to Lisbon. On the Praça do Comércio, he made the government flee without firing a single shot: when he found himself facing an armored unit loyal to the regime, he advanced alone, white handkerchief in hand. A loyalist general ordered his troops to fire - but they refused. This turning point illustrates a key moment: the revolution was held together by individual acts of disobedience.

Later, Maia had the barracks where Caetano had taken refuge surrounded, and assured the press surrounding him that the entire army was on his side: this gamble helped tip the situation.

Non-violence

The Carnation Revolution held on a narrow ridge line: that of uncompromising pacifism. From the outset, the MFA officers had chosen not to tolerate any act of violence, aware that a single shot could have triggered an uncontrollable response from the loyalist army or the political police forces.

Their exemplary discipline was rewarded: the population took to the streets even before victory was assured, cheering the soldiers and spontaneously placing carnations in the barrels of their rifles. This immediate popular support was decisive, both as a legitimization of the coup d'état and as a bulwark against any attempt at repression.

Tactical amnesty: renouncing revenge

The other pillar of this strategy was the careful management of the fall of the regime. The dictator Marcelo Caetano was guaranteed a departure into exile, under protection, without suffering public humiliation. This form of "tactical amnesty" made it possible to conclude the revolutionary day without reprisals, without summary trials, and above all without provoking the radicalization of the regime's last supporters. This choice, although uncomfortable for those who hoped for immediate justice, paid off in terms of the stability of the transition. A revolution that humiliated or totally crushed its adversary could have created the conditions for a backlash. Here, it was the intelligence of the compromise that paved the way for democracy. This major bloodless success was a testament not only to the skillful strategy of the insurgents, but also to the culture of non-violence rooted in Portuguese society.

Only the political police (PIDE) put up armed resistance, firing into the crowd, leaving four dead and 45 injured, the only victims of this revolution.

The MFA therefore facilitated the transition to a democratic regime. However, the long process was not without tension: the years following the revolution were marked by struggles between political factions, massive economic nationalizations and the difficult withdrawal from the colonies.



Arrival of General Spínola, April 25, 1974

CONCLUSION

The Carnation Revolution remains a remarkable exception in the history of democratic transitions: a military coup transformed, in less than twenty-four hours, into a peaceful popular uprising, leading to a lasting transition. This success was no accident, but the result of a series of identifiable factors.

Firstly, it was based on an **atypical coalition between junior military personnel and civil society**. The MFA did not represent the entire army, but a fraction morally and strategically opposed to the continuation of the colonial war. This internal fracture, amplified by inequalities in the recognition and promotion of officers, opened a political breach. It underlines the importance, in other contexts, of **identifying potential reformist segments within military institutions**.

The MFA strategy illustrates the **power of fine-tuned coordination and non-violent tactical discipline**. No shots were fired between the insurgents and the forces that remained loyal to the regime. This choice, far from being naive, was based on a clear-headed calculation: any armed escalation could have led to civil war or legitimized brutal repression.

On the other hand, military restraint encouraged rapid support from the population, who took to the streets even before the outcome of the uprising was certain. Popular legitimacy was grafted onto the military initiative, transforming it into a revolution.

The final essential lever: **the intelligence of compromise**. The MFA agreed to negotiate an honorable exit for Marcelo Caetano, guaranteeing him exile in Brazil. This form of “tactical amnesty” avoided a violent collapse of the state apparatus and a logic of revenge. In any transition, knowing how to renounce immediate revenge in favor of long-term stability is a major strategic condition.

The Carnation Revolution also shows the importance of **narrative and popular symbols**. It shifted public opinion. The choice of the places occupied, the staging of a unified movement, and the controlled communication on the radio reinforced the perception of a legitimate, almost inevitable action. The image of carnations in rifles, born of a spontaneous gesture, projected a joyful and popular revolution.

The unique characteristics of this event – non-violence, a strong rejection of colonial wars and a peace-oriented national culture – make it **an exception that is difficult to reproduce**, unlike some of its modus operandi. Recent contexts show that without a clear desire to hand over power to civilians, the military tend to take power. Any attempt to encourage a positive role for the army in a democratic transition must therefore be preceded by a significant amount of convincing, accompanied by solid institutional guarantees and an international framework supporting the transition.



A street in Lisbon on April 25, 1974

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