

ROBERT McCLOUGHIN, Lisbon, portrays the man who is defending democracy *The Guardian - 7.8.78*

# Eanes, keeper of Portugal's conscience

"PRIME MINISTER needed. Competent and democrat, with or without experience. Good contacts and party support required. Very serious business. To start immediately." As this mock advertisement on the front page of a leading Lisbon weekly suggests, there is no obvious choice of a successor to Mario Soares as Portugal's new premier, and whoever President Antonio-Ramalho Eanes picks, from now on it is he himself who will be playing the leading role.

After two years of refereeing for the politicians, the shy soldier president is at last being forced on to the field. Now that the four major parties have effectively ruled out the possibility of a compromise that could last until the next scheduled elections in 1980 it is up to him to find some way of enabling the new democracy to go on functioning.

The events of the last two weeks, with party leaders tearing up the work of weeks of tough bargaining and angrily denouncing each other, have made the task seem indeed a "very serious business." Eanes must decide whether to choose a party member, an independent civilian or a military figure to try to arrange a reconciliation. Beyond that he must decide whether to recall the national assembly now to prepare for elections early next year, or dissolve it and hold them immediately on the basis of an old register that would exclude nearly one million new voters. According to the constitution, he could go beyond these limits: in spite of their deep suspicion of the potential "Bonapartist" role he could theoretically build. The parties have by their actions encouraged him to head towards one-man rule.

Fortunately for them, the 43-year-old president has seen his job almost solely in

terms of protecting one of Europe's youngest and most vulnerable democracies from would-be dictators. The Portuguese made an unusual choice in this unsmiling officer with horn-rimmed glasses and a taciturn manner. Other dominant figures before him—the intellectual dictators, Antonio Salazar and Marcelo Caetano, the eccentric, monocled General Antonio de Spínola and the revolutionary hero, Major Otelo Carvalho—have all been outstanding, charismatic individuals. Eanes, by contrast, has barely a trace of their ambition.

Yet no one doubts that the voters knew exactly what they were doing. Tired of strong men who tried to impose a personal vision not all were prepared to shake, they chose one who could be relied on to champion party rule.

When Carvalho and his fellow conspirators overthrew the old regime on April 25, 1974, Eanes was a lowly major fighting in Angola. Marked out by a record of mild opposition to the war, he was brought back to run the national television service. The following year he resigned, shocked by a left-wing charge of news bias.

Still smarting from this humiliation by the radicals, he rallied the moderates among his fellow officers to halt the left-wing tide. As rumours of an imminent Communist takeover grew during the autumn of 1975, he planned a military operation against rebellious conscripts. Proof of a left-wing conspiracy has never been produced: What is certain is that Eanes's swift action on the night of November 25 put an end to all talk of socialist revolution. The obscure soldier was hailed by the three non-Communist parties as the saviour of democracy. He became supreme military commander and was persuaded to run for

president, winning with a handsome 61 per cent that put Carvalho and two other candidates in the shade.

During the first part of his five-year term Eanes has been at pains to leave the day-to-day governing to Soares, who as leader of the largest party was an uncontroversial choice as prime minister. Meanwhile, the President took up the cause of the 2.5 million Portuguese forced abroad by Salazar's economic policies, winning important concessions for them from foreign governments.

While Soares fought for a place in the European Community, Eanes tackled the tricky issue of selling reformed, democratic Portugal in the Third World. In June, as a result of some persistent diplomacy, he won the biggest prize: a reconciliation with Angola and the end of years of mutual suspicion with the former colonies.

But Eanes's most vital function has been seen as a bridge between the politicians and the military. "Whether we like it or not," one leading Conservative observed recently, "the military is one of two political forces in this country. Just by existing it has great influence on what we do or think. We know it doesn't have the slightest desire for a political role, but it is foolish to think that it could never intervene again. Eanes is there to discourage that."

The President moved quickly and discreetly to restore the morale of the services, battered by 13 years of agonising conflicts in Africa and two of revolutionary adventures at home. He paid special attention to strengthening Portugal's role in NATO, building a new crack brigade equipped with arms provided by the United States and West Germany. Yet his action has been too discreet for some senior officers, who

privately wish he would abolish his leftist-dominated advisory Council of the Revolution, resign as overall commander and leave the task of weeding out the politically-minded officers to a full-time professional.

The son of a building worker and a housemaid from a central rural district, Eanes has a rough directness that contrasts sharply with the smooth confidence of other national leaders. State visits by, among others, President Giscard d'Estaing, President Tito and Spain's King Juan Carlos, brought a crop of jokes about his protocol gaffes.

His conspicuous austerity — he has been known to fly abroad in a creaky prop plane rather than the presidential jet — has gone down well with a people pressured by high prices and acutely conscious of the extravagance of some of their other leaders. He is shown to be well ahead of his rivals in the polls and most people think he will be re-elected easily in 1981.

If, that is, he can overcome the doubts raised by his first set of political decisions. He has created much distrust of the Left by inviting the President of the dictatorship, Americo Tomas, a man morally responsible for 16 years of police tortures and murders, to return from exile in the interests of "humanity and national reconciliation."

Moral considerations also lay behind his refusal to allow the Socialists to continue in government once they had been abandoned by their Conservative partners. Had he let the arrangement die a natural death, according to some observers, he would have gained time to work out something to take its place. As it is, they say, he may have helped to create the worst confusion for three years with no obvious solution in sight.



President Eanes: gaffes