Portugal hovers between Left and Right

From Jill Jolliffe in Lisbon

Portugal's politicians hope November elections will end instability by giving a firm indication of the popular will. But it is equally possible that they will not do so : the parliamentary deadlock results from having four major parties lacking a parliamentary majority.

Despite a marked drift to the Right, post-revolutionary Portugal still hovers between Socialism and capitalism.

The parties of the Right believe that Portugal is dominated by a revolutionary caste spanning sectors of the military, the Communist Party, and the Socialists. The Social Democrats and Centre Democrats want to end the country's lingering commitment to Socialism. They point to the 1976 nationalisation of key industries and southern farmlands as irreversible and commits Portugal to a socialised economy.

The Constitution is due to be revised next year, and the Rightists will campaign on a platform of erasing all refernces to Socialism. They also support the return of some collectivised land to its former owners.

Dr Francisco Sa Carneiro is president of the Social Democrats, Portugal's second largest party, which could emerge from the elections with an increased vote. He is an anti-Communist, with a large popular following, especially in the conservative north. His detractors say he is authoritarian and changes political positions too readily.

Sa Carneiro distrusts President Eanes, and the forces who support him, and believes there is a movement afoot to discredit parliamentary parties in favour of a strengthening of presidential power.

"The President belongs to a military group, the Group of Nine, which took power in November 1975 not, as they said, to fight the Communists, but to replace one military faction with another," he says.

"Some groups would like to see Dr Mario Soares and myself put aside as party leaders, in order to make things easier for certain presidential forces. That is why these elections are crucial. I think the future of the country hangs on them."

In the turbulent days of the revolution the far Left argued—against the Socialists and Social Democrats—that Portugal should regard itself as part of the Third World, and identify with Africa rather than Europe.

The Socialists—who stand for a streamlined, enlightened capitalism rather than Socialism—have always argued for Portugal's integration into Western Europe. In particular, they are strong advocates of EEC entry, although their economic logic is not particularly sound, as the Portuguese economy is so weak that sudden exposure to EEC competition could increase its problems.

Against this pro-European trend, there is a deep anti-Western current in Portuguese thinking, which has its origin as much in Salazarist neutrality as the revolution. This has made President Eanes's initiatives to improve relations the former African colonies popular, even among Leftists who otherwise distrust him.

For the conservative parties, whose supporters include former colonial officials and businessmen, his dealings with Mozambique's Frelimo and Angola's MPLA Government amount to treason.

The Africa-Europe debate symbolises Portugal's political division. The far Left and the Communist Party oppose EEC entry and support the President's African diplomacy; the Socialists typically straddle Right and Left by supporting stronger African ties at the same time as they advocate EEC entry; while on the right, the Social Democrats and Centre Democrats support guerrilla opponents of Frelimo and MPLA. EEC entry, and deeper involvement with the Western military alliance.

For these people, President Eanes's choice of Maria de Lurdes Pintassilgo as Prime Minister is another example of the dominance of the Left-leaning Africanists.

Agrarian reform has been a factor in the fall of four Governments since 1976. Land collectivised during the revolution is being returned under a Socialist-sponsored law passed in 1977. The peasants have the support of all parties to the left of the Socialists, who are determined that not one acre shall be returned to landowners. Those to the right of them insist that the 1977 law must be applied to the letter.