

PORTUGAL

# Eleven parties line up for election 'season'

By José Ramalho



Lisbon parliament: whose turn is next

This weekend marks the opening of one of the longest "election seasons" in history as the Portuguese go to the polls to elect an interim parliament due to sit for little more than six months. Until the end of 1980 they will be called to vote in municipal elections, constitutional general elections and presidential elections.

The Portuguese cannot complain that they are not being offered a wide choice. Contesting this week's election will be 11 parties and coalitions ranging from the right-wing Christian Democratic Party to an array of minor extreme left-wing parties which decry the Portuguese Communist Party as being too tame and conservative.

The main contest will be fought by the Democratic Alliance, an uneasy coalition of social democrats, centrists, monarchists and reformists; the United People's Alliance which groups together the Portuguese Communist Party and the Portuguese Democratic Movement; and the front-runner Portuguese Socialist Party.

Regarded by the biggest parties and coalitions as simply a nuisance are the Portuguese Workers Communist Party, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Workers Party of Socialist Unity, the Labour Project, the Portuguese Marxist-Leninist Communist Organisation, the Leftist Union for Socialist Democracy and the People's Democratic Union.

The Democratic Alliance which is running under the slogan "We will win, Portugal will change", confidently predicts a landslide vote for its electoral platform. But if it gets a majority of seats in Parliament the challenge facing the alliance is a formidable one. In a country beset with overwhelming economic and financial problems and social and labour unrest further aggravated by a spate of selective terrorism, they have only six months to prove to the voters that they made the right choice.

"What if no party or coalition wins an absolute majority?" was the question put by Lisbon's leading daily *Diário de Notícias* to a cross-section of political leaders.

Says Democratic Alliance candidate Pinto Balsemao: "We will not agree to form a government unless we have a parliamentary majority". Quoting the failures of previous minority governments and also those appointed by President Ramalho Eanes, he sees only two alternatives: an absolute majority for his own party or for the so-called "majority of the Left" due to the tendency of Socialists and Communists to pool their votes in parliamentary divisions.

Durable politician Mário Soares, leader of the Socialist Party, says the forthcoming elections pose a simple dilemma: "Either the conservative-monarchist bloc (the alliance) wins and that means that the constitution and the spirit of the April 25 1974 revolution will be destroyed, or the Socialist Party wins. That is all there is to it."

Political observers see the December 2 elections as a dress rehearsal for the full-scale electoral battle of October 1980 when voters will elect a constitutional parliament. Already a few more parties are waiting in the wings to join in.

As the countdown begins for the interim election Portugal is on a headlong rush to a full confrontation between two diametrically opposed concepts of life. On one side are the Marxists who have dominated the Portuguese political scene since the April 1974 revolution

with disastrous results for the country and on the other the Democratic Alliance pledged to fight regimentation and collectivism, to encourage private enterprise and revise the pro-Marxist constitution of the country.

A ghost haunting all parties and coalitions is abstentionism. Long gone is the democratic fervour that seized the crowds in the heady days of the revolution. With politics and politicians thoroughly discredited the number of abstentions from voting has been increasing alarmingly.

In the polls for the 1975 constituent assembly, abstentions stood at 8,34% — corresponding to half a million voters. The percentage rose to 16,47 (or a million voters) in the 1976 legislative elections. A few months later when municipal elections were held 35,4% of the electorate failed to turn up at the polls. About 2,3 million voters had decided to stay at home.

Perhaps the most influential force in Portugal, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, has been appealing to voters to go to the polls. The bishops claim that abstentionism may have profound consequences for the future of the country.

Practically all the bishops have taken an openly anti-Marxist stance. The primate-archbishop of Braga leads the movement against totalitarian forms of government. He says: "Cowardice is improper of a true Christian and a loyal Portuguese." The Cardinal-Patriarch of Lisbon, Dom António Ribeiro, emphasises that Christianity and Marxism are incompatible. The only exception is the bishop of Setúbal, the notorious Red industrial belt of Lisbon, Dom Manuel Martins, who has shown a clear preference for Marxism-Socialism.

In a clear acknowledgement of the power of the Church, Socialist leader Mário Soares has been visiting influential bishops to persuade them that his is the "party of the poor".

Communist leader Álvaro Cunhal claims that thousands of Catholics are members of his party and that he has in the party ranks many priests.

Buckling under a barrage of millions of words the Portuguese voter is more perplexed than ever. He is however spared the extra worry of analysing opinion polls. The Portuguese regime which claims to be the freest democracy in the world, has put a total ban on surveys of public opinion.

In a bid to beat the ban the influential national weekly *Tempo* in association with other Portuguese newspapers arranged for a Spanish daily *Diário 16* to publish the results of a poll conducted in Portugal. It was promptly sued by the Government's National Elections Committee.

Known as strongly pro-Democratic Alliance, *Tempo* could go no further than announce in banner headlines, "The polls show that one of the contestants will win a majority vote." It takes little imagination to guess which.

Predicting a clear-cut victory for the Democratic Alliance in this week's election, *Tempo's* editor-in-chief Nuno Rocha writes that this will align Portugal with modern political trends in Europe. "The centre parties have won prestige and votes as against the leftist movement which ruled the old continent since the last war."