

Women Add a Certain Pizazz to Portugal's Politics

By JOHN DARNTON
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LISBON — When feminist groups in Portugal look back over the past 10 years, the victories they count up would make women in the United States gape in astonishment.

There was 1976, when a husband's legal right to open his wife's mail was abolished. Then there was the 1978 revision of the civil code, which allowed a married woman to have her own bank account, vote in all elections and transport her children across the border without the written permission of her husband.

So, considering the status of women in Portugal only a decade ago, after nearly a half century of right-wing dictatorship that was ideologically hostile to women's rights in any form, it is not surprising that politics here is still largely a man's game.

On the other hand, although men hold all the important posts in Government, political parties and the unions, there are many here who think that the most interesting and innovative politicians around are women.

'They're More Daring'

"I think women, when they get to a certain level of education, act less conventionally than men," said Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, a special adviser to President António Ramalho Eanes. "They're more daring. Underlying their actions is the conviction there is nothing less to lose. They're not working for their own careers but for causes."

Miss Pintasilgo, a 54-year-old chemical-industrial engineer, is the only woman who has held high office in Portugal, but not as a result of election. The President appointed her Prime Minister from August 1979 until January 1980, until elections could be held.

Her name is the first to pop out when Portuguese television crews do people-in-the-street interviews on "women and politics." She sometimes comes out on top in polls on potential candidates to succeed the President in elections next year.

She also manages to convey the impression of being outspoken in a way that preserves her credentials with a wide range of groups, including the liberal Roman Catholic women's organization, Graal, whose Portuguese chapter she heads. Thus she remained aloof from a recent bitter debate in Parliament that led to liberalizing the country's anti-abortion law.

"I was not involved publicly. The question of abortion is not that simple," Miss Pintasilgo said. "At least it was an attempt to erase from the penal code a real injustice — women were going to jail for an action that was not their sole responsibility. But it's a sensitive subject."

Such temperate caution is not shared by other women in politics, who tend to



Women are among Portugal's most interesting and innovative politicians. Clockwise from right: Helena Roseta, Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo and Zita Seabra.

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fight for causes with a barricades fervor that is at times tantamount to the male establishment.

One is Zita Seabra, a 34-year-old firebrand who took to politics at the age of 15 as a clandestine organizer for the illegal Union of Communist Students and is now a member of the Communist Party's Central Committee. She is one of 20 women in the 250-member Parliament, where the fight for abortion is inextricably linked to her name.

Miss Seabra believes that the army-sponsored revolution that began in April 1974 wrought a change in the "mentality" of women and conferred equal rights on paper, including an equal rights clause in the 1976 Constitution that returned democracy to Portugal. But she feels that their daily lives are much unchanged.

"In most of Portugal, especially the rural areas, women are still inferior," she said. "In the cities the situation improved after the revolution, but now with rising unemployment there's a reversal. And when a woman works eight hours in a factory, she still does all the household chores. In Portugal, women live mostly for pots and pans and TV soap operas."

Discrimination holds true in politics,

too, she asserts. Women are apt to be placed lower down on the lists of candidates of the party tickets, or passed off to run in difficult constituencies.

"In my first campaign, I went to a bottling factory and the workers sneered," she said. "Doesn't the C.P. have anyone else to send us?" they said. Now I make it a point to go there every time there's a campaign and they accept me. They say, 'That woman speaks very well. She speaks like a man.'"

The women now active in politics represent ideologies ranging from right to left. Among the Social Democrats, the junior partners in the Socialists in the governing coalition, one who stands out is Helena Roseta, a 36-year-old architect.

She is the Mayor of Cascais, a seaside resort and fishing harbor near Lisbon. She won the office in December 1982 after a campaign by bicycle and has kept her popularity high by keeping her office door open to the townspeople. When recent floods decimated Cascais, she left out of bed to direct rescue operations; that kind of personal activism is new here.

A rebel, Mayor Roseta sometimes finds the right-leaning, pro-entrepreneurial attitude of her party constricting. She broke with the party and abruptly resigned a seat in Parliament two years ago when it would not back her campaign to free political activists from prison.

"I saw that we could have a problem here like Ireland's," she said. "It's stupid in this country to create artificial situations for violence."

She believes that women, especially in the countryside, are treated much as they were in the rest of Europe "before the Industrial Revolution." But she does not call herself a feminist.

"I don't think people should be divided into feminists and anti-feminists," she said. "I think we should fight for equality, but not because we are not different. The differences must be respected."

"Portugal is not as machista as Spain or Latin American countries. The influence of women in culture is

enormous — in the 12th and 13th centuries, the Portuguese kings even took feminine names to sign their poetry. Perhaps that's why we're less violent."

The woman who set off the most controversies is Isabel do Carmo, a 44-year-old endocrinologist whose views on revolution drop off the political spectrum. Active since the age of 15, she joined the Communist Party in 1958 and then parted ways in 1970 because, among other things, she advocated violence to overthrow the dictatorship.

With her husband, Carlos Antunes, she started the Revolutionary Brigades, an urban guerrilla group whose first spectacular action was the bombing of a NATO facility in 1971. Before the revolution the group performed 24 "operations" and afterward the two were charged with "moral authorship" of a string of politically motivated bank robberies.

Now, Miss do Carmo's views have mellowed somewhat — she no longer believes that violence is "the correct tactic" for the moment — and the group she founded, which evolved into the Revolutionary People's Party, has split. But her past has caught up with her. "I'm still facing a lot of charges," she said. "I think there're about 15."

Two weeks ago, she was jailed on an old charge, went on a hunger strike and was released. Because she has already spent more than four years in jail in preventive detention — a year longer than what is legally permissible — a movement is growing in the legislature to pass a special amnesty bill.

Her plight has been taken up by a number of women, including Mayor Roseta and Miss Pintasilgo, and perhaps this has given her a new perspective. "I think women are much more interesting than men," she said. "Two years ago, when we did a hunger strike, it was women who led it. As leaders, men are autistic. They talk in a cassette language. Women escape it. Their sensibility to daily problems allows them to cut through all the static."

"I'm beginning to think our whole struggle, the struggle of the Revolutionary People's Party, was really a fight carried on by women."