3 Structuring the Political System

THE CHANGING NATURE OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Events following the breakdown of communism in Eastern and Central Europe have illustrated the fact that political institutional arrangements are crucial to the development of a successful democracy. The growing interdependence of nation-states and the globalisation of everyday life are putting pressure on nation-states that are still nationally oriented to change their structure, nature and culture. This aspect of institutional change became quite evident in the 1980s and early 1990s. The rapid advances in production technology, the transformation of class-based societies into knowledge-based ones and the reemergence of economic and political liberalism have led to a change of confining conditions for the development of present-day nation-states. The need to develop a more flexible state structure and culture have made it necessary to dismantle the institutional arrangements of the welfare state.

The idea of the 'competition state' emerged in the 1980s and is still in the making. It is a flexible institutional arrangement that delegates former powers of the public sector to the private sector. Public policy becomes privatised, segmented and local. The ideology that a national core of public policies should be undertaken by the state is questioned. In this regard the political institutional system was one of the first victims of this shift at global level. In the case of Portugal the transition from an authoritarian political regime to democracy was accompanied by many problems of adjustment. The complete collapse of the authoritarian regime left an institutional vacuum that was first filled by revolutionary institutions in 1974–5 and only afterwards replaced by democratic representative ones. This structural change had to be followed by the development of a democratic cultural code inside the institutions. This was made possible by the gradual consolidation and institutionalisation of democracy in Portugal. In this process the Portuguese elites had to comply with the international zeitgeist of liberalism and democratisation and follow the prescriptions of international and supranational organisations (the EU, the IMF and the World Bank).
The Portuguese example tells us principally that institutional reshaping is heavily dependent on international factors. To an extent, the devising of the new Portuguese system has been conditioned by the demands of the global system. In the two decades of Portuguese democracy the constitution of 1976 has been revised three times to comply with the demands of the international system.

The original Marxist-inspired constitution included both revolutionary and representative Western-style elements. This eclectic document was highly controversial among the political elite. The right-wing CDS voted against the constitution and the PPD/PSD became the main actor in the process of constitutional revision (Lopes, 1976). Five years after the revolution the first constitutional revision led to the abolition of the Council of the Revolution, the highly controversial supervisory body of the MFA, and to the political system being handed over to civilians. In place of the Council, the Constitutional Court was set up to watch over the constitutionality of law and political decision making.

The second constitutional revision (1989) focused on its economic provisions. The revision adapted the constitution to the liberal international climate and Portugal’s recent membership of the European Community. Above all, it was intended to change all the provisions inherited from the revolution aimed at protecting the huge public-enterprise sector. With the new constitutional arrangement, privatisation of these enterprises was regarded as the main objective of the liberal Social-Democratic Party, led by the economist Anibal Cavaco Silva. The constitution was also freed of all references to Marxism and Socialism, and it became quite West European in nature.

The third constitutional revision (1992) was undertaken because of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). Several arrangements had to be made to cope with ratification of the treaty. The most affected institution was the Assembly of the Republic, which gained the additional power of monitoring and evaluating the process of European integration.