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Portugal: Crisis and Early Authoritarian Takeover

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1 General background

Portugal entered the ‘age of the masses’ without several of the problems which characterized other democratic regimes in interwar Europe. As an old ‘nation-state’ whose political frontiers had remained basically unchanged since the late middle ages, Portugal on the eve of the twentieth century corresponded closely to the ideal model of liberal nationalism. ‘State’ and ‘nation’ co-existed well and there was strong cultural homogeneity; there were no national or ethnic-cultural minorities in Portugal, nor were there Portuguese populations in neighbouring countries; furthermore, there were no religious or ethnic-linguistic minorities (Martins 1971). In Portugal there is a nearly complete absence of the historical and cultural variables which typified other breakdown cases (Costa Pinto and Monteiro 1994).

The most important historical variable relating to Portugal was the country’s imperial and subsequently colonial character. From the seventeenth century Portuguese imperial power had been complemented by its political and economic dependence on Britain; only at the end of the nineteenth century was Portugal confronted with the threat posed by the European powers to Lisbon’s ‘historic rights’ in Africa (Alexandre 1991).

Tensions with Britain increased dramatically during the 1880s and led for the first time in contemporary history to strong anti-British sentiments following the British ‘ultimatum’ of 1890 (Teixeira 1990). London foiled Portuguese aspirations to the territory of what is now Zimbabwe and, in 1890, forced Portugal to abandon her intention to unite Angola and Mozambique. This episode helped to cement modern Portuguese nationalism and marked symbolically what up to the 1970s was to be the main variable of Portuguese foreign policy: the defence of her colonial heritage. In fact, one might say that ‘the identification of the colonial empire with nationalism in Portugal provides a kind of functional equivalent to the divisive nation-state issues’ present in other European societies at the time (Martins 1971: 63).
In the second half of the nineteenth century Portugal could be categorized as a non-industrialized country with a stable system of ‘oligarchic parliamentarianism’. The dynamics of social and economic change did not differ much from that in other ‘semi-peripheral’ countries which Mouzelis (1986) has defined as exhibiting a combination of ‘early parliamentarism and late