Voting for Illiberalism

Portugal's Presidential Runoff as a Clash of Democratic Models

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On 8 February 2026, Portuguese voters will decide a presidential runoff between António José Seguro, backed by the Socialist Party, and André Ventura, leader of the far-right Chega. The argument I advance here, however, is analytical rather than electoral: that this election crystallizes a confrontation between two models of democracy – one liberal, rooted in the constitutional settlement that emerged from the 1974 revolution, and one illiberal, that treats constitutional constraints as obstacles to the expression of popular will rather than as safeguards of it.

The powers of the president

The Portuguese presidency is not a ceremonial role in the German or Italian sense. Portugal's semi-presidential system grants the head of state significant powers, the most consequential of which is the ability to dissolve the parliament and call early elections. The outgoing president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, a prominent constitutional law scholar, exercised this power three times. Since 2022, Portugal has held three legislative elections – a situation of political instability which has certainly played its role in the growth of the far-right. In a fragmented parliament where no party holds a majority – which is Portugal's current situation – the president's role as moderator, arbiter and, *in extremis*, decision-maker about the survival of governments is of decisive constitutional importance. The president also wields a suspensive political veto over legislation and holds the exclusive power to trigger the Constitutional Court's a priori review – effectively converting the presidency into a *de facto* negative legislator.

It is this institutional context that makes Ventura's candidacy constitutionally alarming. His political project is not simply about occupying the presidency; it is about redefining the rules of the game. His party manifesto includes life imprisonment and chemical castration for sex offenders, and his slogan deliberately echoes the motto of Salazar's *Estado Novo* dictatorship, previously appropriated by Bolsonaro. In December 2025, a Lisbon court ordered the removal of discriminatory campaign posters targeting Roma people. Chega, founded only in 2019, now holds 60 parliamentary seats and constitutes the main opposition force.

The drivers of Chega

The most powerful driver of Chega's rise has been immigration – specifically, the sharp and visible increase in migration from South Asia, a recent phenomenon in a country historically accustomed only to immigration from Portuguese-speaking and Eastern European countries. The second has been corruption – or, more precisely, the perception that the political establishment is structurally corrupt. The resignation of Prime Minister António Costa in November 2023 amid a criminal investigation was followed by yet another parliamentary dissolution in 2025, this time triggered by conflict-of-interest allegations against Prime Minister Luís Montenegro. Together, these events provided Ventura with a narrative of systemic failure that reinforces the nativist one. As the political scientist António Costa Pinto has argued, Chega is not a neoliberal protest party but a welfare-chauvinist one: it demands a strong state, exclusively for nationals, and frames immigrants as parasites on the welfare system. This combination of exclusionary nationalism and social statism gives Ventura's political project its electoral base.

Portugal's trajectory differs from countries with continuous post-war organizational legacies – Italy's

Fratelli d'Italia descends from the neo-fascist MSI; France's Front National (later Rassemblement National) was founded in 1972 by figures with Vichy-era backgrounds. Chega has no such lineage. The 1974 revolution did not merely end the dictatorship – it produced a rupture. The revolutionary period radicalized the transition, the 1976 Constitution enshrined antifascism as a foundational principle, and the political system that emerged excluded the far right from legitimacy for decades. Yet the absence of organizational continuity does not mean the absence of ideological inheritance. Ventura's slogan echoes Estado Novo rhetoric: Salazar is selectively rehabilitated as a figure of order and probity; colonial nostalgia runs through the party's nationalist imagery. That Chega emerged from the mainstream conservative party – much like Spain's Vox emerged from within the Partido Popular – may say less about novelty than about the limits of democratic consolidation: the sympathy for authoritarian rule that both transitions were supposed to have buried never fully disappeared and has now found autonomous political expression.

Towards a Southern Hungary

The broader model is not difficult to identify. As Costa Pinto puts it plainly, Orbán's Hungary is the template. The competitive authoritarian regime that Orbán has built – using democratic elections to gain power, then systematically hollowing out the constitutional constraints that prevent majorities from concentrating authority and marginalizing minorities – is precisely the kind of political order that Ventura would seek to consolidate, adapted to Portugal's semi-presidential framework. Ventura's Chega sits in the Patriots for Europe group in the European Parliament alongside Orbán's Fidesz. The distinction between liberal and illiberal democracy – first articulated by Fareed Zakaria in 1997, and since then tested in practice from Budapest to Warsaw – maps precisely what is now being contested in Lisbon: whether democracy is reducible to winning elections, or whether it necessarily entails the constitutional protection of rights, the separation of powers, and the rule of law.

What would be the imminent risks of a far-right victory? Even if Ventura won – the polls point unanimously to Seguro's victory – Portugal would not become Hungary overnight (neither did Hungary become Orbán's Hungary overnight, for that matter). The president does not hold executive power – although he indirectly influences public policies through his veto and moderation powers. But the risks would be real and specific. A President Ventura would control the dissolution power, as well as the power to dismiss the government, turning the permanent threat of early elections into an instrument of political pressure – effectively presidentializing a system designed to resist precisely that, especially after the constitutional revision of 1982, which reduced the powers of the head of state. The 1976 Constitution, drafted in the aftermath of the revolutionary period, had created a strong presidency where the president could dismiss governments without invoking any grounds. The 1982 revision curtailed this power, conditioning dismissal on the need to safeguard the regular functioning of democratic institutions, meant to prevent a directly elected president from claiming a mandate superior to parliament's. But the power to dissolve parliament, conceived as an escape valve for parliamentary deadlock, remained less constrained – a tension in the system's anti-plebiscitary design that a President Ventura could exploit. He would command the most powerful bully pulpit in Portuguese politics, lending the legitimacy of the highest office to a discourse that frames constitutional limits as elite impositions on the sovereign people.

A Trojan horse in parliament for nationalists and neonazis?

The confrontation between Chega and constitutional constraints is already underway. The party has been in a condition of *de jure* internal illegality since 2021, after successive court rulings blocked its conventions and statute amendments for violating internal democratic requirements. More recently, Chega members have attacked the Constitutional Court for striking down restrictions on immigrants' rights negotiated with the governing PSD, qualifying the rulings as "a

betrayal of Portugal". The porosity between Chega and organized extremism is not hypothetical. In January 2026, the Judiciary Police dismantled the neo-Nazi group 1143 in the largest operation against organized hate crime in Portuguese history. Among the 37 arrested were active Chega members and former party candidates; the group's leader, currently serving a prison sentence, had reportedly described Chega in 2019 as a "Trojan horse" for the far right in parliament, encouraging nationalists to join the party, according to journalist Miguel Carvalho's investigation Por Dentro do Chega. The party's vice-president spoke at a November congress alongside the founder of American Renaissance and the organizer of the 2026 Remigration Summit, the pan-European gathering of identitarian activists scheduled for Porto in May.

The breadth of cross-partisan support for Seguro – spanning from former conservative presidents to the liberal centre and the left – signals the perceived magnitude of the constitutional threat. Notably, Portugal is celebrating the 50th anniversary of its Constitution at this critical juncture.

Portugal was the last Western European country without a significant far-right force in its political system. That exceptionalism is over. The question now facing Portuguese voters is the same one facing democrats across Europe: whether democracy means merely winning elections, or something more.

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