Christian Mobilization in Portugal in the 21st Century

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Political system and religious panorama

Portuguese democracy emerged from the military coup that, on 25 April 1974, overthrew the authoritarian regime—the Estado Novo (New State)—that had been in power since 1933. Since its very beginning, the new semi-presidential democracy has been characterized by a parliamentary party system that is quite stable, both on the left, with the Partido Comunista Português (PCP; Portuguese Communist Party) and the Partido Socialista (PS; Socialist Party), and on the right, with the Partido Social Democrata (PSD; Social Democratic Party) and the Centro Democrático Social (CDS; Social Democratic Center). In 1999, the Bloco de Esquerda (BE; Left Bloc entered Parliament, joining the PCP in the radical-left opposition, while changes in the parliamentary center right took place in 2019, with the election of MPs from Iniciativa Liberal (IL; Liberal Initiative) and the populist radical-right Chega (CH; Enough). In the 2022 legislative elections, these two parties significantly increased their parliamentary representation, while the CDS disappeared from Parliament.

As far as the state–Church relationship is concerned, from the 1930s onwards, the authoritarian regime promoted a de facto alliance with the Catholic Church—made official by the Concordat agreement signed by the Vatican and the Portuguese state in 1940—around the common ideological pillars of corporatism, anti-liberalism, and anti-communism (Pinto and Rezola 2007, 365–366). To avoid negative reactions from the mostly Catholic Portuguese people who were still mindful of the anticlerical Portuguese First Republic (1910–1926), the post-April 25th democratic regime confirmed the

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Concordat of 1940, bringing only a few changes. In any case, the 1976 Constitution reinforced the principle of separation between the state and the Church through the non-confessional nature of the state and the independence of the Church, which was confirmed by the 2001 Lei de Liberdade Religiosa (2001 Religious Freedom Act). From then on, the state has proceeded with a slow legislative alignment process with respect to the Catholic Church and other religious minorities, especially in matters such as tax exemption, access to public media, and the role of religion in the education system (Moniz, Pinto, and Brissos-Lin 2020, 218).

The religious identity of Portugal is still strongly associated with Catholicism, despite some minor changes being underway. According to the 2011 Census carried out by the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE; National Statistics Institute), 81% of the Portuguese identified as Catholics, 4% belonged to other religions, and 7% had no religion. The minority belonging to other religions were composed mainly of Christians (85%), with non-Christians comprising 15% of this minority. These Christians were mainly Protestant (22%) and Orthodox (16%), although 47% belonged to other Christian churches. The non-Christians were composed of Muslims (5%), Jews (1%), and believers of other minor non-Christian religions (8%). Despite representing a small minority, the percentage of non-Catholics has tripled in the last 30 years, mainly thanks to citizens coming from the former colonies following the decolonization process and immigrants concentrated in metropolitan centers. As far as the Portuguese Catholics are concerned, the decrease in religious practice, as well as the increasing secularization seen in cleavages on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, is quite significant (Franca, Fernandes, and Cravidão 2018, 11–22). This phenomenon also affects people's identification as Catholics: less than 80% in recent years (Teixeira 2012, 6–7).

The social mobilization of the Catholic right wing

In Portuguese democracy, right-wing Christian activism, especially Catholic, started to emerge with greater vigor in the 1990s due to the abortion debate.[2]

2 The primary source for this reconstruction of Christian-Right political activism was an interview with António Maria Pinheiro Torres, a leader of this social movement (interviewed on June 26, 2021).

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The abortion law had already been altered once in 1984 (Law 6/84), determining that there would be no legal punishment for abortion in three cases: severe and incurable birth defects of the child detected within the first four months, risk of death or severe harm for the woman, and cases of rape within the first three months. This alteration provoked some reaction in the Catholic milieu but not a long-lasting movement. By contrast, in the 1990s, the debate on free abortion mobilized Catholics within the center-right parties in Parliament (the PSD and the CDS) and within Christian organizations, particularly Opus Dei (in Portugal since 1945), Caminho Neocatecumenal (Neocatechumenal Way; in Portugal since 1969), Renovamento Carismático Católico (Catholic Charismatic Renewal; active since 1974), and Comunhão e Libertação (Communion and Liberation; in Portugal since 1987).

Throughout the decade, this Catholic network organized events on this theme, including with MPs as guest speakers, but there was never a structured strategic alliance between the social movement and the political parties. The Catholic activists affiliated with political parties acted as individuals—not as members of factions within parties.

It was only after 2000 that Comunhão e Libertação began a series of conferences to discuss the political situation in the country and the subjects most important to the organization, but this was without much follow-up. The lack of a political project was something that the Christian groups shared with other more conservative groups. For example, the Portuguese chapter of the Brazilian group Tradição Família e Propriedade (TFP; Tradition, Family, and Property) was a short-lived experiment, disbanded due to controversies over its Brazilian leadership, which became the Custódios de Maria (Custodians of Maria). The weakness exhibited by TFP in Portugal also characterized other minor groups associated with TFP: Acção Família (Family Action), Arautos d'El Rei (Heralds of the King), Associação da Nobreza Histórica (Association of the Historical Nobility), and Centro Cultural Reconquista TFP Lusa (Portuguese TFP Cultural Reconquest Center; Zanotto 2007). The Lefebvrian Fraternidade São Pio X (Society of Saint Pius X) was also always very minor in Portugal and not politically active, but it attracted a few young people with its taste for traditional rites such as the Tridentine Mass (the Traditional Rite Mass used from 1570 until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s). The Portuguese Church countered this attraction by holding Latin masses in the São Nicolau Church in the center of Lisbon, until they were permanently prohibited by the Vatican. The weakness of radical groups in the 21st century is consistent with the history of these fringe groups in Portuguese democracy.

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Thus, in the 1990s, the debate on abortion mobilized all the Catholic circles, mainly against the radical left and the more progressive sectors of the Parliament. In this period, the pro-life movement concentrated on social issues more than party politics.

However, the pressure from this social movement facilitated the promotion of the first referendum on abortion on 28 June 1998 (Alves et al. 2009, 6; Feio 2021, 132). The referendum campaign was an important testing ground for Catholic organizations in terms of social mobilization. The victory of "No" against the decriminalization of abortion in the 1998 referendum (50.91% "No" vs. 49.09% "Yes" voters) was the high point of right-wing Christian mobilization, but this was without effect, as there was no quorum. On this occasion, 68.1% of citizens with the right to vote did not vote in the referendum. The 31.9% who voted were divided between 50.9% (1,356,754 voters) who voted against the decriminalization of abortion and 49.1% (1,308,130 voters) who voted in favor. However, the more than one million votes obtained by "No" were a sign of the strength of Catholic activism.

With the start of the new millennium, the movement witnessed two opposite dynamics: on the one hand, there was constant growth, greater professionalism, and a structuring of the social movement; on the other, defeats on various fronts emerged.

In terms of the successes, a window of opportunity opened in 2002 with the resignation of António Guterres as prime minister, following the defeat of the socialists in municipal elections. On that occasion, the PSD leader José Manuel Durão Barroso had contacted António Maria Pinheiro Torres and Isilda Pegado, prominent figures in the anti-abortion movement, as he realized the importance of mobilizing Catholics to gain voters for the 2002 legislative elections. The two were added to the PDS electoral list and became MPs during the governing mandates of Durão Barroso (2002–2004) and Pedro Santana Lopes (2004–2005). In the meantime, these two Christian activists founded the Federação Portuguesa pela Vida (FPV; Portuguese Federation for Life), an institutional umbrella for various organizations of the pro-life movement, with its president Isilda Pegado and vice president António Maria Pinheiro Torres at the top. Its repertoire of actions—street demonstrations, public petitions, and the creation of ad hoc associations—applied more pressure on the government. In 2004, for example, an FPV petition (217,000 signatures) demanded that the PSD and the CDS respect promises made during the electoral campaign not to alter the law on abortion during their mandate,

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despite a left-wing petition (126,000 signatures) to raise the abortion debate in Parliament again (Vilaça and Oliveira 2015, 10–11).

From this moment onwards, the center-right parties began to seek contacts with Catholic activism more intensely. In 2005, José Ribeiro e Castro, a CDS member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2009, invited the FPV to participate in an international campaign to insert a reference to Christianity into the preamble to the European Constitution, a campaign that resulted in a petition with 82,000 signatures in Portugal. Moreover, in 2005, the CDS brought into Parliament José Paulo Carvalho (first president of the FPV) and Isabel Galriça Neto (spokesperson for "No" in the 1998 referendum). In 2009, it was the turn of Assunção Cristas, invited by the CDS leader Paulo Portas to join the party because of her television performance in the "No" campaign in the second referendum on abortion in 2007. Assunção Cristas became president of the CDS in 2016. All these people were co-opted at an individual level rather than through negotiations between the social movement and the right-wing parties. In fact, these relationships remained quite frail.

This process of institutionalizing the Catholic social movement did not prevent successive heavy defeats, which were signs of the growing secularization of Portuguese society. These defeats included a campaign against the decriminalization of drug consumption (2000), a campaign against Law no. 12/2001 on the *morning-after* abortion pill (2001), and a campaign against a draft law on medically assisted procreation (2006). The heaviest defeat, however, was in 2007: the second referendum on abortion, promoted by the PS, which was approved in Parliament with the support of the center right (the PSD). In the second referendum, "No" won only 41% of the votes, compared to 59% of votes in favor of decriminalizing abortion. At a geographical level, the results confirmed a division between the more conservative north and the more left-leaning south (Manuel and Tollefsen 2008, 122).

For the leaders of the Christian social movement, the referendum campaign was a clear sign of cultural changes both in the Catholic Church and in the center-right parties. In contrast to the 1998 campaign, in 2007, the Portuguese Catholic Church—on its own initiative rather than under orders from the Vatican—limited itself to taking a few positions publicly, though without much enthusiasm, as if it already felt culturally defeated. As to the political parties, in 1998, the president of the PSD, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, was an active participant in the referendum initiative, whereas in 2007, the PSD permitted

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a referendum to be held that now favored the left. In fact, in contrast to 1998, in 2007, the parties were the main funders of the referendum campaign.[3]

Despite its defeat in 2007, in the following years, the movement grew in size. In 2012, the movement started organizing the largest annual mobilization of the Christian Right: the Caminhada pela Vida (Walk for Life), attracting thousands of people and, after initially only being held in Lisbon, spreading to various other Portuguese cities. In these demonstrations, the presence of young people was notable, attracted less by the Catholic organizations they belonged to and more by the social networks they frequented, such as channels protesting the alleged cultural hegemony of the left and the harassment of Christian students in civic education classes in public schools. The coordinator of the Caminhada pela Vida platform, José Maria Seabra Duque, highlighted young Catholics as the driving force behind Christian social networks both in the street demonstrations and in their schools (Costa 2014). However, this cannot be described as a right-wing radicalization of Christian activism. The overwhelming majority of the social movements were not involved in far-right organizations. Indeed, in the 2012 edition of the walk, the media noted the participation of the extreme-right Partido Nacional Renovador (PNR; National Renewal Party) with its own insignia. Although made uncomfortable by this situation, the organizers merely relegated the radical group to the tail of the march. The media frequently associate the PNR with the Catholic right wing, not only due to the party's anti-abortion and anti-*gay-lobby* demonstrations but also because of the closeness of its leader José Pinto Coelho to Opus Dei. The same applies for the right-wing populist party Chega, which participated in the 2021 edition of the walk without, however, attracting much attention from the demonstrators. In this sense, the radical parties did not reap a leading position within the Christian social movement.

Moreover, the practical effects of this social mobilization continued to decline. In 2008, the social movement's opposition to a new divorce law, which allowed either spouse to divorce without the prior consent of the other party, and the creation of the Plataforma Cidadania e Casamento (Citizenship and Marriage Platform) had no effect. Similarly, the mobilization against the new law 60/2009 on sex education in schools was unsuccessful, as was the subsequent petition to suspend the law on abortion. The situation worsened still further with the socialist government of António Costa (2015–2022), which was supported—in an unprecedented arrangement for Portuguese democracy—by

3 Interview with António Maria Pinheiro Torres on June 26, 2021.

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the radical left of the PCP and BE. In 2016, for example, the Costa government significantly modified the rules governing the funding of contracts of association between the state and private schools, which primarily affected Catholic schools serving the majority of the 20% of Portuguese students in private education. This socialist policy caused a significant mobilization of various players (parents, teaching and non-teaching staff, and directors of private schools), who were already members of organizations or founders of associations of this type, many of them Catholic in nature. But this mobilization was short-lived, as it never attempted a formal connection with the opposition parties (the PSD and the CDS), which, in turn, were uncertain whether to become spokespeople for this protest. The lack of connection between the Catholic social movement and the political parties was at the root of the failure of this mobilization. This movement was an example of the inability of Catholic groups to organize and of political parties to catch the wave (Leitão and Resende 2019, 204).

Minority Christian groups and radicalization

Despite political defeats, over the years, the political activism of Catholic organizations began to spread from the abortion issue to other issues raised for public debate by the left-wing government: medically assisted reproduction (2006), the introduction of the day-after pill (2007), marriage between same-sex couples (2010), and euthanasia (2020). The broadening of the dissenting agenda had two effects from a political standpoint: on the one hand, it promoted alliances with other denominations, namely the Evangelicals; on the other, it fostered the emergence of Christian right-wing parties that later played an important role in the success of right-wing populism in Portugal.

With respect to the Evangelicals, since the last decade of the 20th century, the number of the people professing non-Catholic faiths grew from 2% at the end of the 20th century to over 5% of the population in the new millennium. These believers belong to a variety of religions, many brought by migratory flows, including Islam, Asian religions, and Protestantism, particularly Pentecostal Evangelicals who are mainly from Brazil (Vilaça 2013, 113). The senior Evangelical organization is the Aliança Evangélica Portuguesa (AEP; Portuguese Evangelical Alliance), which has been in Portugal since 1921 and includes almost all the Evangelical churches. From the 1980s, Evangelical churches outside the AEP began to establish themselves, namely the Igreja Maná (Maná Church), active since 1984, and the Igreja Universal do Reino de

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Deus (IURD; Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), active since 1989. In general, in Portugal, the Evangelical world has even fewer connections than the Catholics to the parliamentary parties, although they have shown a growing desire for involvement in politics (Vilaça 2015, 72–73), especially given the advancing progressive agenda in Portugal.[4] The Igreja Maná, for example, has paid a great deal of attention in the last few years to right-wing intellectuals and politicians, including those involved in the Christian social movement and the populist party *Chega*, inviting them for interviews on its television channel Kuriakos TV.

The first contacts between the AEP Evangelicals and the Catholics of the social movement date back to 2007 and were established around the Grupo Civico Interconfissional (Interfaith Civic Group), made up of Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, and some Muslims from the Central Mosque of Lisbon. Their closest collaboration, however, was in 2010, when the Plataforma Cidadania e Casamento (Platform for Citizenship and Marriage), created by the FPV, organized a demonstration of 10,000 people in the center of Lisbon and presented a petition to Parliament for a referendum on same-sex marriage. Under the then socialist government of José Sócrates (2005–2011), the request was rejected by Parliament, despite the 92,000 signatures presented (the minimum required was 60,000). Law 9/2010 permitting civil marriage between people of the same sex had been introduced in Portugal in May 2010 (Brandão and Machado 2012). Today, Evangelicals are a constant presence in pro-life activities and Christian initiatives against the left-wing agenda, especially LGBTIQA+ activism and gender education in public schools.

With regard to the political parties, the mobilization around the 2007 referendum began discussion in the social movement on the possibility of starting a political party that was Christian and anti-abortion to capitalize on the strength of numbers shown by the movement. The leaders of the social movement disagreed with the project, as they considered it a mistake to crystallize it into a political party, an approach that had already been shown to have had little impact in other Western countries. This was a strategic, but not a political, divergence. In 2009, despite the leaders' opposition, militants from the social movement founded the Portugal Pro Vida (PPV; Pro-Life Party). The PPV had originally emerged as an anti-abortion party, but over the years, it extended its support to all pro-life policies from conception to natural death.

4 Interview with António Maria Pinheiro Torres on June 26, 2021.

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In electoral terms, the PPV's performance confirmed the fringe nature of the project: 0.15% in the legislative elections of 2009 (8,461 votes) and 2011 (8,205 votes), 0.04% (2,659 votes) in 2015, and 0.4% (12,017 votes) in the European elections of 2014. In the 2019 European elections, and with a new name, the Partido Cidadania e Democracia Cristã (PPV/CDC; Christian Democracy and Citizenship Party), the party, led by Manuel Matias, was part of the electoral coalition Basta, together with the Partido Popular Monárquico (PPM; Populist Monarchic Party) and two movements that had not yet become official parties, Democracia 21 (Dem21; Democracy 21) and Chega. Their poor results (1.49%; 49,496 votes) undid the coalition, but it represented a turning point for the PPV/CDC, which, maintaining its alliance with Chega, contributed to the election of André Ventura, the leader of the populist radical right-wing party, as a deputy in the legislative elections of 2019, with 1.3% (66,442) of the votes.

The exponential growth of Chega in terms of media coverage, its militant base (increasing from 700 to 25,000 members between the summers of 2019 and 2020), and electoral performance (between 8% and 9% in 2020 polls and then 7% in the 2022 general elections, with 12 MPs elected) led to the dissolution of the PPV/CDC in the summer of 2020 and the incorporation of its members into Chega. Thus, Chega became an attractive party for the Christian right wing, whether Evangelicals or Catholics. Its attractiveness was increased by the religious profile of André Ventura, a former seminary student with a penchant for using religious language for political ends. For example, he has constantly mentioned being called by God in his mission to save Portugal. In May 2021, he publicly prayed at the Sanctuary of Fatima, accompanied by the Italian right-wing populist Matteo Salvini, leader of the Lega, a partner of Chega in the European group Identity and Democracy. Accordingly, Chega added two Catholic activists to its new leadership elected in 2021: Rita Matias (daughter of Manuel Matias), a rising star in the party and its youth leader, and Pedro dos Santos Frazão, a member of Opus Dei and also a teacher at the order's college Planalto.[5]

Both Matias and Frazão are currently Chega MPs, elected to Parliament in the January 2022 legislative elections. The case of Pedro Frazão illustrates a rule in the political militancy among right-wing Catholics: he joined Chega to introduce its Catholic agenda but not through any overt intervention by Opus Dei,

5 In October 2021, the participation of a group of Christian militants from the Chega party in the March for Life, with a banner stating "always in defense of life: Chega" provoked some resistance from the organizers of the event.

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which, in fact, has always preferred to keep its distance from the parties.[6] This preference of Opus Dei had already been seen in the cases of other prominent members since the 1990s, such as Paulo Teixeira Pinto, the secretary of state for the presidency of the council of ministers (in the PSD government of Aníbal Cavaco Silva), who was formerly connected to the banking sector, and Manuel Brás, a cadre of the ephemeral right-wing Partido da Nova Democracia (PND; New Democratic Party) during the 2009 legislative elections. Despite the political independence of these men from Opus Dei, the media have always made a connection between this ultra-conservative group and Portuguese right-wing parties. This connection has been even more marked in the case of the Evangelicals in Chega. In May 2020, the weekly magazine *Visão* exposed an alleged web of Evangelical churches actively supporting Chega, particularly noting the militants at the forefront of the party who were also Evangelical activists (Carvalho 2020). Indeed, many Evangelicals committed themselves to Chega from the start, sharing video and text materials of fellow Brazilian believers opposing the left-wing agenda (mainly gender politics and LGBTIQA+ mobilization). In this case, in an official statement, the AEP refuted any connection with Chega, which, in turn, reaffirmed its secularity and openness to believers of any religion.

The deepening ties between Catholics and Protestants in the social mobilization and autonomous initiatives of Christian activists has led, in recent years, to the appearance of groups and initiatives relatively autonomous from the FPV and the right-wing parties. In 2019, for example, the presence of an LGBTIQA+ group in a civic education class in a public school triggered a reaction from Christian groups, which, through PSD deputy Bruno Vitorino, went to Parliament to state their opposition to so-called gender ideology. From this reaction emerged the association Deixem as Crianças em Paz (Leave the Children Alone), which has been especially active on social networks, proving to be adept at attracting new activists. One of these was the Evangelical activist Maria Helena Costa, today a Chega militant, who is opposed to the latest generation of feminism and gender issues in public education. Another example is Sail–Defesa da Liberdade (Sail: Defense of Freedom), a network of Christian lawyers, judges, and other professionals who provide legal support to citizens or groups of citizens who consider their freedom of religion, education, and speech to be threatened (Morais 2022). This organization operates along the

6 Interview with Pedro dos Santos Frazão on 6 October 2021.

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same lines as Alliance Defending Freedom—International (ADF), with which it does, in fact, collaborate at events in Lisbon.

Despite these connections with counterpart organizations abroad, Portuguese Christian activists are not so deeply involved in international networks, with the exception of those organizations to which they belong. For example, the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM) has the Partido Popular Monárquico (PPM) as a Portuguese member, despite this monarchist party being at the very fringe of Christian activism in Portugal. Moreover, in January 2021, the Brazilian right-wing network Revista DireitaBR, close to the government of Jair Bolsonaro, organized its congress in Lisbon, with the participation of, among others, Maria Helena Costa, not as a Chega party cadre but as the president of the Associação Família Conservadora (Conservative Family Association). In addition, Chega MP Rita Matias is currently a member of the European Fraternity Christian network, although not as a representative of the party.

Conclusions

Throughout its 30 years of existence, Christian activism in Portuguese democracy has mobilized thousands of people, but it has provided neither a window of opportunity for extremist fringes nor a reliable basis for an autonomous political party. In particular, the right-wing Christian social movement continues to be more comfortable relating to the classic center-right parties than to the new populist radical-right party Chega. This is evident in the absence of any radical reaction in response to the offensive against the Portuguese Catholic Church following the findings of the Independent Commission for the Study of Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church (promoted in 2021 by the Portuguese Bishops' Conference). The broadening of activism from the anti-abortion battle to opposition against so-called *cultural Marxism* has promoted a connection between Catholics and Protestant Christians, particularly Evangelicals. Under the social movement umbrella, several Christian micro-structures have been created that operate in the social realm, supporting pregnant women and single mothers, taking in abandoned children, providing family planning and sex education, sharing natural procreation technology (NaPro), and supporting homosexual people uncomfortable with their sexual orientation. However, the Christian Right has been unable to stop the achievements of more power-

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ful progressive social movements, especially the LGBTIQA+ movement, due to the lack of an organized advocacy strategy (Mota and Fernandes 2021).

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