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Portugal

“A deep, passionate revolution”

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The following speech was made by Left Bloc deputy Francisco Louçã at a session of Portugal's parliament on April 25, 2004, marking the 30th anniversary of the April 1974 revolution in the country.

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Francisco Louçã

Francisco Louçã is one of the Left Bloc's members in the Portuguese parliament

More than one hundred years ago, the poet Antero de Quental, founder of the socialist current in Portugal, explained that the causes of the decay of the peoples of the peninsula were, first, the fanatical papism that had created the Inquisition and ruined education, second the colonialism that consumed everything and, third, the absolutism that blocked development.

Portugal lived in a "sleepwalking dream faced with the 19th century revolution", wrote Antero, which prevented it from understanding that "the name of the modern spirit is the revolution". Was Antero a blasphemer, a romantic, a saint? He was simply modern.

But the devout, colonialist and authoritarian regime did not keep up with the revolution of modernity in the 19th century, not even in the following one - it was only so much later, on April 25 1974, that we arrived in the 20th century.

Thirty years ago, Portugal lived plunged in sadness. Isolated from Europe, it was a mean, provincial country. Ideas were suffocated, women were ordered to obey, the daring emigrated, the young died in war, the poor despaired, those on a middle income were bored, and the rich got richer. Opponents were imprisoned and persecuted.

The powerful marked this country. They lived in the shade of the dictatorship, turned as always towards the past: receiving first gold from Brazil, later money from Africa, and at the end the privileges and perks guaranteed by the protective hand of Salazar. Parasitism was the genetic hallmark of this pathetic bourgeoisie which abominated change, bound as it was to a megalomaniac Empire. This elite, born and bred in opposition to the revolution of modernity, stuck in a time that never moved on, was both the cause and the result of Portugal's decay.

Since democracy was born in opposition to this elite and its dictatorship, which was incapable of evolving because that would mean its death, democracy could only be born revolutionary. And so it was.

Those who knew that to resist is to succeed, who had the determination to finish with war, the women and men who came together around April 25, made of the revolution the mother of democracy. A mestizo revolution, in the convergence between the peoples of the colonies and of the metropolis. A courageous revolution, because it knew the enemy was in our own country and it was here we had to defeat him. A democratic revolution, because it guaranteed freedoms and sought the democratisation of society, the kind of modernity that ensures equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities for all.

A thoroughgoing revolution that completely changed the political situation and humiliated that conservative elite. To such an extent that, thirty years later, after so much revenge, not only have the agrarian reform lands been returned to the big landowners and the companies and capital been returned to those who had fled to Brazil - but now the rich and powerful demand the supreme victory. They want to confiscate our memory. They want the reassuring certainty

that the revolution that took place, could never have happened.

How they would like commemorations of anaesthetizing salutations, of dumb fanfares, submissive apologies, of overblown liturgies, and of silenced people!

How they yearn for a one grand festival that cannibalises history and removes its spirit, for an anniversary that dismantles the revolution - the more candles, the less life; the more years, the more nostalgia; the more time that passes, the less the urgency. This is what the guardians of normalization prescribe.

Surreptitiously, they steal the revolution letter by letter, so that it seems that everything was superfluous, an exaggeration. For surely the dictatorship was not all that bad; in time it would come into line and bend itself to a subordinate friendship with Europe.

A chorus of ageing rebellious youth, now repentant and ennobled, former heretics turned into comfortable snobs, tells us repeatedly that revolution is always excessive, is necessarily a nuisance, scary, a carnival - and that after the carnival what is left are only ashes, the inevitable ashes. As rebuilders of the past, because they want nothing of the future, they content themselves with perpetual repetition of the present.

It was against this tired and infirm spirit that the risk, the flight of the 25 of April was undertaken, an uprising of the soul, an explosion. For that is what the modern revolution is - an explosion of life.

The women, who would not resign themselves to obedience. The workers who wanted what was theirs, dignity, rights, what they produced. Everyone, the freedom and the right to inform, to create, to know, to argue, to decide, Portugal in both Europe and the world.

Over and over we hear the "excesses" of that time criticised. What was excessive was the delay, the apathy. We were in a hurry to overcome half a century of dictatorship, the dictatorship that quietly takes root in people accustomed to subservience, the dictatorship that dominated all social relations: between men and women, bosses and employees, teachers and pupils, the old and the young.

It was an almost impossible task. And only a revolution can achieve the impossible. That's what democratisation meant: overcoming the dictatorship in every place and at every moment.

What an extraordinary leap this country took then! If there is one thing we can be proud of in our 20th century it is this founding moment when the past of resistance gained the right to the future and created democracy.

It was not a natural evolution. It was a deep, passionate revolution lived as if it was always the first day of the rest of our lives.

Let nobody now dare to belittle or disdain this rupture, this revolution. The 'abrilistas', those of us who took part in that April, just as much as today's enemies of the April revolution, all of us only gained the right to be born on that day. And it was only on that day and after that day that we grew up. It was the start of the modern revolution, leaving behind that stupor in which the country had so long been plunged. There was democratisation in education, health, work, politics, sport, and leisure. There was democratisation even in the family, religion, and in love.

In the most illiterate country of Europe, the people's knowledge wrote the most highly cultured stories. In a country

that knew little of democracy, the revolution created the freedom. In a country entranced by the mirage of an immense overseas empire, we found ourselves anew in Europe where we live.

It was the 25 of April that allowed us to live.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen Members of Parliament: Will Antero ask us, one hundred and some years later, if the causes of the decay have been overcome? Thirty years later, will the April revolution ask us if we are still grown up? If we are more European and more open to the world? If we live more justly? And if, being just, we are modern?

Of course the big questions never have definitive answers. We will only discover why we live as we are able to live in the process of answering the questions.

But we do know that the revolution of modernity in the 21st century runs the same three big risks that it always ran - fanaticism, colonialism and absolutism, the same causes of decay already recognised by Antero, but which are now one and the same.

Colonialism and absolutism are being reborn in the Empire, an absolute, lawless power that promotes a new Wall of apartheid in Palestine with its spiral of terror, that unleashes new oil wars, above all that proudly announces infinite war, where it wants, when it wants and as often as it wants. It is the first and only empire to seek justifications for a bloody war that it says is already over.

The Portuguese State has bowed to this colonialism and absolutism, releasing men and women of the GNR to join the Imperial sepoy in the occupation of the Iraq, as this plunges from disaster to disaster, victim by victim.

Absolutism too, at the core of a European project in crisis, governed by mean selfishness, turned towards Washington, where behind closed doors foreign ministries plot against democracy to impose a directorate of the powerful, excluding entire countries and impoverishing the citizens who are the true measure of Europe. Fanaticism, absolutism and colonialism are the signs of a time of worldwide war, dirty politics, mediocre rulers and despair for so many.

Worse still: fanaticism and absolutism join hands in this economic horror where the stock markets always go up as layoffs increase, and where good news for companies is the same as destitution for half a million unemployed in Portugal.

Fanaticism and absolutism are reborn because, 30 years on, our economic elites still hope for new gold from a new Brazil, happily squandering community funds and always asking for more, as these become the guarantee for a new kind of rentier, dealing in private hospitals, private prisons, private banks, private water and electricity, private pensions and clandestine immigrants with no rights.

30 years on, this is how the ruling elite wants Portugal: a peaceful, quiet country, a country for football, and a country that is like a neatly kept lawn, an esplanade, a country retreat.

A country of good business opportunities and generous subsidies, of easy friends, where you scratch my back and I scratch yours. A tiny country, that doesn't get in anyone's way and where everything is forgotten.

This decadent status quo is the real challenge to modernity: in those areas that we made progress thanks to the

revolution, we are now going backwards.

Against this decadence and backwardness, we do not want to come here to defend the achievements of April. No. That would be little, far too little. It would be to think of the past and to give up on the future. We want much more.

We want, with the legitimacy that April gave to all those that dare to claim a genuinely modern democracy, the freedom that is lacking, the responsibility that is so scarce, the social justice that is the biggest debt Portugal owes to itself.

The revolution that April began was the response of delayed modernity to a bourgeoisie that detested the idea of evolution. The conservative elite of today, regenerated and shaped anew, is still horrified by change and governs the country in the only way it knows. It launches new colonial adventures and counts subsidies behind the curtains. It wants a Europe that makes no democratic demands and a country consigned to "sleep-walking stupor".

This reactionary and backward-looking elite has always failed, in centuries past as today, whenever it was necessary to look forwards. It needs to be defeated so that freedom and justice can fulfil their promises.

Thirty years on, the modern task is to triumph over this elite. That is the commitment made by the Left Block on this 25th of April. That is why we salute this day:

- Long live the Republic
- Long live April 25th
- Long live Socialism