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Portugal, 52 Years of Democracy — How Was It Possible?

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FACT BOX

- In 2026, Portugal marked 52 years since the 25 April 1974 Revolution.
- Portuguese democracy consolidated fundamental freedoms, but accumulated persistent signs of institutional fatigue.

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- The OECD indicated that only 32% of Portuguese people had high or moderately high trust in the national Government, below the OECD average.
- In the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index, Portugal scored 56 out of 100 and ranked 46th among 182 countries.
- The central question is no longer merely how it was possible to degrade the democratic promise, but how much longer we will allow it to remain possible.

Portugal, 52 Years of Democracy — How Was It Possible?

There are questions that are not merely questions. They are open wounds. They are mirrors held before a country that grew used to celebrating April while

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There are questions that are not merely questions. They are open wounds. They are doors creaking in the corridor of History. They are mirrors held before a country that grew used to living between the ritual celebration of 25 April and the practical degradation of its promise.

Portugal, 52 years of democracy — how was it possible?

How was it possible that, after a revolution which opened the windows of a stale, fearful and kneeling country, we built a formally free democracy, yet one so often captured by mediocrity, clientelism, strategic smallness and an almost religious resignation?

The Revolution of 25 April 1974 marked the beginning of Portuguese democratic life, bringing an end to the Estado Novo and opening the way to political freedom, a democratic Constitution, party organisation, free voting and the end of censorship. But celebration is not enough. Memory without demand becomes historical tourism. And April was not made to be a postcard, an anthem, a carnation on a lapel or a speech for the occasion. April was a promise of dignity.

And that is precisely where the problem begins: **the promise was greater than the men who later administered it.**

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organisation, free trade unions, a plural press, European membership, the modernisation of infrastructures, social and cultural openness — all of this represented an immense transformation compared with the grey, censored and closed country of the dictatorship.

Freedom House continues to classify Portugal as a free country, with a score of 96 out of 100 in its 2025 report. But a democracy may be free and still be ill.

It may have elections and lack vision.

It may have a parliament and lack greatness.

It may have parties and lack statesmen.

It may have universities and lack critical thought.

It may have newspapers and lack courageous journalism.

It may have laws and lack timely justice.

It may have a State and lack public service worthy of the name.

This is what happened in Portugal: **democracy survived, but demand atrophied.**

The party occupation of the State

For decades, political parties turned into machines for occupying the State. Not all in the same way, nor all with the

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companies, regulators, municipalities, foundations, offices and various dependencies.

Democracy, instead of breathing freely, began to breathe through party life-support machines.

And the people? The people were lulled.

They were lulled with public works.

They were lulled with European funds.

They were lulled with promises of convergence.

They were lulled with the eternal “now it will finally happen”.

They were lulled with television debates where political struggle was confused with a vanity fair.

They were lulled with commentators who explain the country every night without ever having managed to change anything during the day.

At a certain point, Portugal stopped discussing the future. It began discussing episodes.

A case. A minister. A committee. A scandal. A poll. An unfortunate phrase. A resignation that never comes. A reshuffle that solves nothing. A majority that does not govern. An opposition that proposes nothing. A President

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low wages, young people emigrating, impossible housing, slow justice, a disoriented school system, exhausted healthcare, mediocre productivity and a public administration that too often seems to have been designed by Kafka after a bad night's sleep.

Trust coming apart

The OECD indicated, in its *Government at a Glance 2025* report, that only 32% of people in Portugal had high or moderately high trust in the national Government, below the OECD average of 39%. The same report noted that only 43% were satisfied with the administrative services they had used, far below the OECD average of 66%.

These figures are not merely statistics. They are symptoms. They are the thermometer of a democracy where electoral legitimacy exists, but trust is slowly coming apart like lime on a damp wall.

And then there is corruption — or, perhaps even worse, the continued perception that the system protects itself. In the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index, Portugal scored 56 out of 100 and ranked 46th among 182 countries, according to Transparency International.

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almost everything is degrading enough to corrode trust.

How was it possible?

It was possible because democracy was confused with party alternation.

It was possible because many citizens grew used to voting against someone, rather than in favour of a national project.

It was possible because parties understood that it was enough to manage fear: fear of the right, fear of the left, fear of the extremes, fear of instability, fear of change, fear of losing a small privilege, fear of losing a job, fear of saying what one thinks.

It was possible because Portuguese citizenship rarely organised itself persistently. It becomes indignant, yes. It comments, yes. It occasionally protests, yes. But then it returns to daily life, to fatigue, to “this will never change”, that terrible phrase which is almost an unwritten Constitution of national resignation.

It was possible because merit was devalued and favouritism tolerated. Because cunning was confused with intelligence. Because too many public and private careers

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It was possible because the school system did not teach enough critical citizenship, free thought, economic literacy, media literacy and moral courage. It trained students for exams, employees for routines, consumers for promotions, but rarely citizens capable of dismantling speeches, demanding accountability and understanding when they are being led by the invisible leash of propaganda.

Media froth and the real country

Journalism, so often, ceased to be a watchdog and became an arena entertainer. There are excellent journalists, naturally. But the media ecosystem as a whole was often captured by speed, economic dependence, proximity to power and the permanent need for spectacle.

Democracy needs a free press; but it also needs a deep press. And Portugal had too much froth for so little depth.

It was possible because the best often left. Because young people, educated with effort by their families and by the country, were then pushed into emigration, as if they were the human surplus of an economy incapable of offering them a future.

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positions change, the names repeat. One goes from minister to consultant, from secretary of state to board member, from MP to commentator, from regulator to regulated, from office to company, from party to foundation.

All legal, naturally. In Portugal, many things are legal. Some are even morally indecent with an impeccable legal opinion attached.

Patience as national anaesthesia

It was possible because the Portuguese people, for far too long, confused patience with wisdom.

Patience can be a virtue. But when it becomes habituation to injustice, it turns into anaesthesia. And an anaesthetised society does not shout when it should. It merely murmurs. It grumbles in the café, sighs on the bus, comments on social networks, votes every four years and then goes home with the feeling that it has participated in History when, in truth, it has merely stamped the continuity of the possible.

And yet it would be a dangerous mistake to conclude that the solution lies in destroying democracy. Democracy is not the problem. **The problem is the low moral, cultural**

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can play Mozart or institutional kitsch music. For far too long, Portugal handed the orchestra to career conductors, obedient musicians and backstage businessmen. Then it was surprised by the discord.

April gave us freedom.

It did not automatically give us lucidity.

It gave us the vote.

It did not automatically give us demand.

It gave us parties.

It did not automatically give us statesmen.

It gave us Europe.

It did not automatically give us development.

It gave us a Constitution.

It did not automatically give us character.

Democracy is not inherited: it is practised

Perhaps this is the great lesson of these 52 years:
democracy is not inherited; it is practised.

Every day. In every school, in every municipality, in every newspaper, in every court, in every company, in every public office, in every vote, in every uncomfortable question that a citizen has the courage to ask.

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It needs citizens who stop waiting for saviours and start building counterpower. It needs parties open to society, not closed around internal careers. It needs a competent State, swift justice, reinvented education, valued science, a productive economy and a public culture of responsibility.

Above all, it needs to lose fear.

Fear of disturbing.

Fear of denouncing.

Fear of breaking with tribes.

Fear of demanding merit.

Fear of saying that the king is naked, even when the king has a majority, a press office and a reserved seat on television commentary panels.

The question that remains

How was it possible?

It was possible because freedom arrived before civic maturity. Because hope was gradually exchanged for management. Because democracy was captured by professionals of political survival. Because the people, tired and generous, believed too many times in the same sellers of postponed futures.

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How much longer will we allow it to remain possible?

Because Portuguese democracy can still be reborn. But it will not be reborn from official speeches, nor from party congresses, nor from solemn ceremonies where April is invoked by those who never understood its demand.

It will be reborn when citizens stop being an audience.
When competence once again matters more than obedience.
When public shame returns to political life.
When young people have reasons to stay.
When justice stops arriving late.
When schools form free spirits.
When the State serves instead of serving itself.
When Portugal stops asking mediocrity for permission to exist.

Epilogue — April is still watching us

April opened the door.

What we did after it is our responsibility.

And what we do now will decide whether the next 52 years will be a continuation of this elegant swamp — or,

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Sources and references

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Fragmentos do Caos — where lucidity still tries to open a path through the organised fog.



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