



Presidential Elections in Portugal: *Cavaquism*, *Sebastianism* and Popular Hopes

Antonio R. Rubio Plo *

Theme: Former prime minister Aníbal Cavaco Silva has been elected in the first round of the Portuguese Republic's presidential elections. His anticipated victory reflects the expectations of voters who, at a time of economic and social crisis in Portugal, have chosen a charismatic leader capable of going beyond mere protocol and working actively in the presidency to solve the country's problems.

Summary: Aníbal Cavaco Silva's wide margin of victory (50.59% of votes) is part of a tradition of Portuguese charismatic presidents, a sort of monarchy elected directly by universal suffrage, but with powers that correspond to those of a head of state in a semi-presidential republic. His election was also favoured by the divisions between the leftist candidates and their obsession with presenting Cavaco Silva as a threat to democracy. By contrast, the president-elect conducted a campaign free of name-calling. He managed to spark the enthusiasm of voters who see in him a renowned economic expert who was prime minister during the period of prosperity and high hopes that characterised Portugal's entry into the European Union. Cavaco Silva has promised 'strategic cooperation' with the socialist government of José Sócrates, but his character will make him an active president, capable of expressing his opinions and offering proposals for the government to act upon.

Analysis: Monarchists say that the Portuguese monarchical tradition lives on in the Presidents of the Republic. This is far truer of the presidents since the *Revolução dos Cravos* or 'Carnation Revolution' –Eanes, Soares, Sampaio and now Cavaco Silva– than of those during the dictatorship, when Salazar and then Caetano overshadowed the presidents, with the possible exception of Marshal Carmona. To some extent, this has been a return to the tradition of the charismatic presidents –ephemeral though they were, due to the political instability of the times– of the 1st Republic, such as Teófilo Braga and Sidónio Pais, both of whom were able to use the broad powers granted to presidents by the Constitution of 1911.

If Portuguese heads of state were appointed by the Assembly of the Republic, they would very likely not seem as charismatic as they do when they are elected every five years by the people. The president carries out his duties in a hallowed setting: the Belem Palace, residence of monarchs since the 18th century. The last two presidents, Soares and Sampaio, however, chose to distance themselves somewhat from this hallowed site by leaving the palace each day and spending the nights at their own private homes –though they certainly did not renounce their charisma–. It is not certain that all their successors will continue this practice. It does not seem that former president and presidential candidate Mario Soares was exaggerating during the campaign when he quoted a 12-year-old boy as saying: 'A

* *Historian and international relations analyst*

president should build new houses and help poor people'. In this respect, the Portuguese political model makes the president a kind of 'father of the nation' –someone who is above the political parties (even though he is a member of one) and who, through the magic of universal suffrage, becomes a living symbol of the nation. Portugal seems to connect in this way with its rich history and legends–. In a certain sense, every five years there is the return or confirmation of a new King Sebastián, the young monarch who disappeared in the wars with Morocco in 1578 and whose unlikely return was awaited by many Portuguese. It could be said that *Sebastianism* is not entirely dead in Portugal, particularly given the Portuguese people's current concern for the country's future and its place in Europe, so well expressed by philosopher José Gil in his best-selling book, *Portugal Hoje. O Medo de Existir*. However, Sebastianism cannot be attributed solely to the candidature of Cavaco Silva, as some analysts suggest. Rather, it is inherent to presidential elections in the semi-presidentialist Portuguese Republic. Sebastianism –this collective urge to put great hopes in a politician– was also present in other presidencies, particularly in that of General Ramalho Eanes, who was considered a national hero for halting the increasing radicalisation of the Carnation Revolution. And if the truth be told, the leftist candidates, particularly Manuel Alegre and Mario Soares, would also have created Sebastianist expectations had it not been for the greater impact of Cavaco Silva.

The constitutional basis for Sebastianism is that Portugal is neither a parliamentary republic nor a presidentialist one like France or the US. The powers granted to the president by Article 133 of the Constitution would suggest a clear preponderance of the executive branch in terms of appointing and removing the prime minister, cabinet ministers and other high officials, including military commanders. In these cases, it is the prime minister and the government who make such proposals. However, Article 133 reserves other prerogatives for the president, giving the head of state a leading role in political life. These include: calling extraordinary meetings of the Assembly of the Republic; addressing the Assembly and the regional assemblies in the Azores and Madeira; and, most importantly, dissolving the Assembly of the Republic, in accordance with the provisions of Article 172, after having heard the parties represented in the Assembly and the State Council. All this means that the president can call extraordinary meetings of the Assembly to deal with specific issues (Article 174.4) on dates that fall outside its usual schedule (between June 15 and September 15). The president can also address the Assembly to call attention to any issue which, in his opinion, calls for action by Parliament. But above all, the prerogative most feared by any government of a political stripe different than that of the head of state, is that the president has the power to dissolve the Assembly. In this regard, Article 172 establishes that the Assembly cannot be dissolved in the first six months after it is elected or in the last six months of the presidential mandate. However, the fact is that the president can do so, and can also set the date of new elections, as long as he has met with the parties represented and with the State Council, the president's consultative political body. The president's potentially leading role is also clear in: his power to veto decrees passed by the Assembly before they become law (Article 134.1) and government decrees (Article 134.4); his power to make public statements on any event or circumstance that may have a serious effect on the life of the Republic (Article 135.5); and his power to ask the Constitutional Court for a preliminary study of constitutionality or a declaration of unconstitutionality (Articles 135, 136 and 137). Speeches, meetings, addresses and trips abroad also provide Portuguese presidents with a great opportunity to mobilise public opinion in the country.

Some observers have accused Cavaco Silva of running an apocalyptic and populist campaign, but in fact the president-elect has maintained a calm, tranquil image that is not incompatible with the crowds and fanfare that accompanied him. In fact, it was his rivals who showed their apocalyptic side by predicting that Cavaco Silva's victory would be a threat to democracy. Throughout most of the campaign, the leftist candidates spoke out against the former prime minister, encouraging fear of *Cavaquism* and in some cases raising the spectre of globalisation and neoliberalism, even though it is well known that neither the prerogatives nor the intentions of the new president radically question the Portuguese social model. As a result of their anti-Cavaco rhetoric, the leftist platform became disperse. In the end, the communist Jerónimo de Sousa won 8.60% of the vote, while the Leftist Block candidate, Francisco Louça, won 5.31%. They framed the debate in terms of the classic conflict between the left and the right –a model that does not work in these times of economic and social crisis–. Voters also saw them as divided, especially since there were two socialist options –Mario Soares and Manuel Alegre– clearly marked by personal confrontation. Whether or not he intended it, Alegre –a poet and member of parliament who obtained a significant 20.72% of votes– gave the impression of being an ‘anti-party’ candidate, which made him appear to be an attractive rebel or non-conformist to voters who were disillusioned with politicians in general. But there was a paradox here: voters perceived that he would be an outsider at Belem Palace and would inevitably be in constant confrontation with the government –in other words, that a socialist would be working against the socialist cabinet of José Sócrates–. If Soares had won, the results would have been no less paradoxical. At the age of 81, Soares surprised everyone by running for president a third time. The 14.34% of votes he received was a disappointing result, since he had expected to finish in second place. As president, Soares could have complicated things in the short term for Sócrates, whom the former president called a ‘revisionist’ not so long ago –though in the election campaign he used more flattering terms and (on the week-end before going to the polls) actually received the prime minister's open support–. The painful adjustments to the economy and state administration undertaken by the socialist government in response to the crisis would necessarily have led Soares, as president, to speak out, since he has been using ‘anti-globalisation’ rhetoric for some time now. Neither did it help Soares that he repeatedly criticised the news media. Regardless of who owns the media, such criticism calls into question journalistic professionalism.

This explains why Cavaco Silva, meanwhile, remained reserved and did not play the game of personal criticism. He was fully aware of having raised high expectations among the public, offering hope in the face of Portugal's economic, social and political problems, which in fact amount to a kind of identity crisis. The public warmed more to Cavaco Silva's slogan –*I know Portugal will triumph*– than to political practice based on the ‘culture of complaint’, the ‘heavy burden of the past’ and the shadow of suspicion. Intuition, perceptions and feelings –factors that go far beyond the powers that the Constitution attributes to the president– have all played a large part in this election. Whether he sought it or not, Cavaco Silva has ended up in the role of ‘saviour of the nation’, not as a populist or half-literate demagogue, however, but as a specialist and economic ‘wizard’ (even though it is the national government that is in charge of economic policy). Charisma will likely be the hallmark of Cavaco Silva's presidency –that of a statesman, who transmits confidence, is well-attuned to public opinion and has even been able to take votes from the socialist camp–. Soares' mistake, therefore, was to dismiss him as a ‘technician’ and not recognise him as an experienced politician. His first-round victory gives the president an image that carries greater political clout and this legitimacy will help

give him more political elbow room. Future historians may see certain similarities with Ramalho Eanes, one of Portugal's most popular presidents who, by the way, asked voters to cast their ballots for Cavaco Silva, going so far as to call him 'the candidate who represents the hopes of April 25'. This was taken very badly by those who have an idealistic and romantic vision of the Carnation Revolution, and who forget that the revolution was a step towards parliamentary democracy –a prerequisite for joining the European Union–. It is odd that the leftist candidates were not able to perceive the emotional component of this campaign, considering that they often make appeals to the heart rather than to reason.

It is worth noting that Mario Soares insinuated in several interviews that Cavaco Silva's candidature was a manoeuvre to dissolve parliament some time in the future –despite the socialist absolute majority– thereby favouring the return of the PSD-PP coalition and, at the same time, getting even for President Sampaio having done the same during the government of Pedro Santana Lopes, which may have contributed to the socialist victory. However, a manoeuvre of this kind would be political suicide for the new president: no head of state has dissolved the Assembly in his first term. Doing so –especially after only a short time– would not automatically guarantee the return of the centre-right after new elections. Dissolving the Assembly would also be risky after the recent infighting in the PSD, which ended with Santana Lopes stepping down from his post as secretary general. It must be borne in mind that Cavaco Silva did not expressly support Santana in the legislative elections and that Santana did not support the former prime minister in these latest elections. In fact, neither the PSD nor the PP explicitly supported the candidacy of Cavaco Silva, which helped him in his bid to run as an anti-party candidate. Furthermore, an absolute majority in Portugal today is not a magic wand to solve problems: Barroso, Santana Lopes and now Sócrates have all had absolute majorities. It is not a question of governability, but rather of strategy and of using the right tactics to deal with challenges: there is a budget deficit, but there is also a deficit in infrastructure, education, skilled labour, new technologies and competitiveness. Portugal has not been an economic success story like Ireland and, in fact, is trailing the EU-15. The danger now is that it could also end up trailing the EU-25, soon falling behind Slovenia, Estonia and the Czech Republic.

It is understandable that the controversial essayist, Miguel Sousa Tavares, asked in a recent article: 'Will Portugal survive until 2013?' (*Expresso*, December 15, 2005). Until then, Portugal is guaranteed 22.5 billion euros in EU funds and has even obtained a three-year grace period to reduce the public deficit to 3% (in 2005 it stood at 6.2% of GDP). Being in Europe is not the same as being dependent on Europe, but the political class cannot agree on long-term strategies and the panorama is beginning to look bleak. Cavaco Silva, as economist turned president of the republic, will have to cooperate with the socialist government led by Sócrates, who is calling for austerity. Not by chance, in his campaign, Cavaco Silva expressed little criticism of the government. His speeches are full of references to 'strategic cooperation' with the government, and given his personality and what voters expect of him, he will be an active president who will not stick to protocol and will make specific proposals for government action. For example, two issues that will spark broad debate among both the political class and the general public are the high-speed trains from Lisbon to Porto and the new airport for the capital. Portugal certainly needs new infrastructure, since otherwise it will become an increasingly marginal country. The problem is that this is a time of budget cuts. The socialists defend these projects, although the PSD now questions them, despite having supported them when it was in government. Nevertheless, Cavaco Silva, as a good economist, will likely support them from a strictly

cost/benefit perspective, as long as the benefits are as much economic as social. It is still not clear what the final criteria of the Sócrates government will be.

Regarding relations between President Cavaco Silva and Spain, it is simply a fact that no Portuguese leader would fail to insist on the need to strengthen relations with its closest neighbour. Cavaco Silva put this conviction in practice when he was prime minister. However, in the Portuguese political and economic context, Spain is perhaps more a model than a key strategic partner. The Portuguese eye Spain's growth indicators with logical envy. European funds have certainly contributed to the new Spanish economic miracle, while in Portugal there is a sense of not having taking sufficient advantage of the time and money provided by Brussels –something Spain did from the moment it joined the Union–. At the same time, Spanish investment in Portugal is viewed with suspicion in political and financial circles, whereas this is not the case with French, British or American capital. One example of this –and certainly not the only one– is that the very mention of Iberdrola in the headlines of the Portuguese press is sure to be followed by comments marked by suspicion and talk of political or economic intrigue. A historical wall remains in place in Portugal, even after the border fences fell after the country joined the European Union. To give another example, the outgoing president, Jorge Sampaio, at the recent presentation of a book on his presidency, expressively described the political space in which a president works (particularly in terms of his independence) as 'an Aljubarrota' [in reference to the 14th century battle where Portugal won its independence from the Spanish crown]. However, events in Spain do not go unnoticed in Portugal, as was demonstrated by a recent article by Mario Bettencourt Resendes, editor of *Diario de Noticias* (January 19, 2006). The author, after loosely comparing the political situation in the two countries, expressed his concern for the stability of the Spanish state after the negotiations on the Catalan Statute. Bettencourt insists that Spain's stability is essential for Portugal's progress, given the interdependence of the two economies, and also for the progress of the EU, to which the future of both countries is linked. In terms not often heard in the Portuguese media, the journalist refers to 'a worrying crisis' and calls for responsibility on the part of politicians and other sectors of Spanish society. This is an example of how the Portuguese will be keeping a closer eye on the Spanish political scene, as well as the economic scene, in the near future.

Conclusion: The victory of Cavaco Silva marks the start of an active Portuguese presidency in which the head of state will often make his opinion known and will explain his projects openly to the government and the general public. Voters want the presence of a 'technical expert' in the Belem Palace and Cavaco Silva will not disappoint them. Given the serious economic and social situation in Portugal, the early days of his presidency will likely be characterised by cooperation with the socialist government of José Sócrates, which is pursuing the difficult task of reducing the budget deficit to 3%. Given Cavaco Silva's strong character, differences may arise regarding the social impact of the government's austerity measures and the methods needed to end the crisis in Portugal. It is unlikely, however, that the new president will consider using his constitutional prerogatives to dissolve parliament, since this would not enhance his image as a man who stands above the political parties –an image he forged during his election campaign–. Also, with four prime ministers in the past five years, new elections would do no good for the country's stability, especially in light of the recent divisions within the PSD, Cavaco Silva's party.