

A culture of irresponsibility



Unemployment, corruption, and problems linked to immigration, health and consumption; these are some of the factors that the Portuguese perceive as obstacles to their human security. In a context of economic crisis, general dissatisfaction and bleak future prospects, it is essential that democracy be strengthened through the exercise of a critical and responsible citizenship.

OIKOS

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The national economic downturn, which began in 2001 and was exacerbated by the international economic crisis, worsened after the events of 11 September 2001 and the rise in crude oil prices in 2002. The result was a punishing decline in people's living standards. Against this background, there is a growing impression that a culture of irresponsibility and impunity reigns in Portuguese democracy.

According to a survey carried out by the *Centro de Estudos e Sondagens de Opinião da Universidade Católica Portuguesa - CESOP* (Centre of Studies and Opinion Research of the Portuguese Catholic University) in July 2003, the major worries that respondents believe are obstacles to human security are the following: unemployment (60.1%), corruption (49.9%), drugs (47.4%), poverty (34.2%), crime (33.7%), bureaucracy (23.7%), lack of morality (11.3%), excessive immigration (10.5%) and pollution (6.7%).

More consumption, less employment

According to press reports, in the first half of 2003 an average of over 150 jobs were lost each day. In one year unemployment grew from 5.1% to 6.3% (third quarter of 2003), and it is expected that the average rate for 2003 will be 6.6%.¹ Official estimates from the European Commission anticipate unemployment rates of 7.2% and 7.3% for 2004 and 2005 respectively. The situation is aggravated by the lack of specialisation and vocational training among a very high percentage of workers.

Besides this, employment is precarious, and people who have recently graduated have difficulty finding their first job. According to the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training's monthly report for October 2003, the majority of those registered at job centres were workers whose temporary contracts had ended, while 15% were recent graduates. The latter numbered 44,000, of whom 60% were women. This figure is 28.5% higher than for the same month in 2002. But this is also the result of a mismatch between the qualifications of those seeking

work and the needs of employers. This combination of factors means that people are unemployed more frequently and for longer periods, which is causing a fall in contributions to the social security system.

According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Security the average gross salary is EUR 1,035 (USD 1,310) - but according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) it is EUR 957 (USD 1,210) - while the minimum salary is around EUR 360 (USD 455). These figures are the lowest in the European Union (EU). What is more, income distribution in terms of gross pay is extremely unequal: the richest 20% of the population earn 7.6 times more than the poorest 20%, compared with an average difference in the EU of 4.6.²

Thus the social security system is being undermined, provoking repeated cuts in pensions, which is one of the main causes of poverty among senior citizens.

In recent decades the Portuguese have become big consumers, and the worsening economic situation has not made them moderate their expenditure. The very high level of indebtedness of families,³ which was already giving cause for concern, is now even more acute. Even with respect to mortgage payments - one of the last items people stop paying - arrears have reached 24%.

A corrupt machinery

In recent years a number of scandals have come to light in the private and public sectors involving administrative officials at all levels - for instance, mayors, government officials, members of parliament, as well as heads of sports clubs. The list includes bribery, economic-financial grand larceny, corruption, fraudulent practices in public tenders and the cover-up of criminal responsibility. Among the Por-

tuguese the order of priority for putting an end to corruption is as follows: in political parties (18.7%), the health service (18%), the tax authority (14.5%), and the courts (14.8%).⁴ Ordinary citizens have the impression that there is no systematic campaign against corruption, and that it has spread, is hindering development and social justice, and threatening democracy itself.⁵ Besides this, the cumbersome bureaucratic machinery encourages both corrupt and corrupters to "resolve" difficulties in their own way. A study on crime and security in Portugal, published in 1998,⁶ concluded that among 7.5 million Portuguese aged 24 or over, about 600,000 had at least once been invited to buy "favours" from civil servants.

The spread of these practices is having a demoralising effect. Some people believe that no one can be trusted, while others find it easy to forget ethical principles and the most elementary norms of conduct.

Fear of immigration

There has been a recent abrupt rise in immigration, which is perceived as a further factor contributing toward insecurity. In 1995 there were fewer than 170,000 immigrants, but in 2002 there were around 440,000, and more keep coming. Today they make up 5% of the population. According to the Frontiers and Foreigners Services (SEF) there were 200,000 "illegal" immigrants in April 2002.

In 2001, in an attempt to check the influx of "illegal" immigrants, the authorities set a special limited legalisation period, after which foreigners who did not have the proper documents would be deported. This strategy did not work, mainly because the "Eastern Mafias"⁷ continued their traffic in people. The exploiters of cheap labour, especially for the construction industry and prostitution, profit most from this situation. In 2003 Portugal made the front page of US magazine *Time*, for being the entry point into Europe of an international women-trafficking network.

Every so often the media reports some more or less violent episode illustrating how these criminal networks use intimidation and extortion, or how unscrupulous employers exploit illegal workers, in

2 *Rendimento, Desigualdade e Pobreza* (Income, Inequality and Poverty). National Institute of Statistics (data from June 2002).

3 In 2001, 96.6% of families were in debt. Bank of Spain and Portuguese Association of Consumers.

4 Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer 2003. www.transparency.org/pressreleases_archive/2003/2003.07.03.global_corr_barometer.en.html

5 Morgado, Maria José (former president of the Portuguese Court of Criminal Instruction) and journalist José Vegar. *O Inimigo sem Rosto. Fraude e Corrupção em Portugal*. Publicações Dom Quixote, October 2003.

6 Viegas Ferreira, Eduardo. *Crime e Insegurança em Portugal*. Lisboa: Celta, 1998.

7 Mainly from Moldavia and the Ukraine.

1 National Institute of Statistics. www.inec.pt

some extreme cases in ways that amount to new forms of slavery.

The public is not indifferent to this issue; three out of four Portuguese are opposed to the new influx of immigrants. The idea of immigration as a threat is based on arguments mainly concerning cultural differences, insecurity, and the job market: 20% fear that citizens from Eastern Europe "are coming to occupy more important positions than many Portuguese", 30% think that "immigrants commit more crimes than the Portuguese", and 75% think that illegal immigrants "should be kept under surveillance so they do not cause problems". As for immigrants' legal rights, almost all Portuguese are opposed to unequal treatment, and while only 25% approve of immigration, 79.7% defend the legalisation of immigrants who are in an irregular situation. Also, 90% agree that "they should be protected against labour exploitation".⁸

It is worth contrasting these impressions with the positive effects of immigration. For years now as a result of various demographic and economic trends the job market has had a low capacity to respond to growth in productive activity. Were it not for immigrants, many productive activities would already have shrunk or even disappeared. What is more, in 2001 the balance between immigrants' tax and social security contributions and the costs that they generate for the State exceeded EUR 311 million (USD 393 million). That is, each foreign worker (legal, or in the process of becoming so) made a net contribution to the State of some EUR 1,390 (USD 1,758). This figure falls to EUR 995 (USD 1,259) if unemployed immigrants are also taken into account.⁹

The ailing health system

The National Health Service (SNS), which ought to be universal and as far as possible free of charge, is causing much concern, above all among people who cannot afford private health cover. The public system very often cannot respond to problems quickly enough, and it is permanently on the brink of collapse. The OECD, among others, attributes this dire situation to mismanagement.

Through a serious lack of transparency in the provision of medical attention and the prescription of drugs, SNS favours particular interest groups (pharmaceutical companies and medical service providers). Portugal is among the OECD countries with the highest per capita expenditure on medicines (19% of the health budget), but only recently has the use of generic medicines been promoted, and this has met with only moderate success.

One of the big shortcomings of the SNS is the fact that the under-utilisation of human and material resources generates long waiting lists, affect-

ing many people whose illnesses alone should not cause the degree of loss of quality of life that they have to endure. There are delays in doctor's appointments, treatment, and above all non-urgent operations in some orthopaedic cases. Since salaries in the public health sector are not very attractive, many medical workers are forced to take a second job, which reduces the quality of attention for the public. Last year a special effort was made to reduce the ever-growing waiting lists by half. In 2002 there were 123,126 patients on lists for non-urgent operations alone. According to data published by the Ministry of Health, the reduction in the number of people on the lists last year was offset by an increase in cases, and now there are more people waiting.

Inefficiency feeds inefficiency. The lack of prevention generates illnesses that are more serious or chronic and which require more expensive treatment (medicines, hospital care) as well as other social costs.

Because of a lack of confidence in the SNS, people are turning to private health services, which account for 44% of spending on health. To meet the cost of these services more and more people are taking out health insurance - today 16% of the population as against 10% in 1998¹⁰ - but the majority cannot afford to.

The disabled: unkept promises

In these adverse circumstances, one of the most vulnerable social groups are the disabled (636,059 people, representing 6.16% of the population, according to the 2001 census)¹¹ and their families. The economic crisis has affected organisations that provide services for the disabled, and it is feared that the programmes and services that are essential for guaranteeing the rights of these people, which are enshrined in national and international norms,¹² may be suspended. Equality of opportunities and non-discrimination must be complemented with the right of disabled people to benefit from measures that guarantee their independence, integration, participation, and life in the community.¹³

At the end of 2003, the European Year of People with Disabilities, the main national organisations representing these people publicly expressed their disappointment. According to the Association for Disabled People, promises were still being broken in the framework of the Basic Education Law¹⁴ (there is even a proposal to segregate teaching for disabled children and youngsters), in the Labour Code (equal treatment in employment and professional activity) and in the Television Law (subtitles for the hard-of-hearing).

The Association also stressed the lack of a network of resource centres and residential homes which would ensure dignified living conditions for disabled people in their old age, as well as domestic help for citizens with complex needs. Still more flagrant is the continuing failure to comply with Decree-Law 123/97 of May 1997. This law requires the elimination of architectural barriers within a period of seven years, but there is a flagrant and on-going failure to comply, as can be seen simply by looking at new construction work.

Finally, the reduction in the public health and social security budget for 2004 has raised concern among all those working on disability issues.

The Portuguese "civil war"

Portugal is in the unenviable position of coming first in the EU ranking for traffic accidents. An average of five people per day are killed on the roads, and 19 suffer serious injuries. The main causes are speeding, and dangerous and drunk driving. The situation is so bad that the press describes it as the Portuguese "civil war".

The data on domestic violence also gives cause for concern. The Portuguese Association of Victim Support,¹⁵ founded in 1990, dealt with 10,009 cases in 2002, 70% of which were related to aggression in the home. Of the victims, 87.8% were women.

Delinquency is closely linked to drugs, and both phenomena were emphasised in the study referred to at the start of this report (CESOP). Around 70% of the prison population are convicted of drug-related offences. However, public concern about this issue varies considerably, and it has been found that to a large extent this depends on the importance that the press gives to specific cases. For example, an increase in the fear of being robbed was recorded at a time when statistics reflected a fall in such crimes. Unfortunately, the ideal journalistic criteria of objectivity and impartiality do not always prevail in the battle for increased circulation.

Conclusion: an open challenge

Portuguese society is poorly or badly informed, and so tends to react superficially to the situations affecting it. The Portuguese often swing from passivity or conformity to loud and disorganised protest. Sometimes someone - even the President - will appeal to citizens to fully assume their role in participatory democracy. The quality of the exercise of citizenship will undoubtedly depend on citizens' clear critical sense and their capacity to organise and take group initiatives in defence of their legitimate interests and wishes. This is an open challenge, and there is still a long way to go. ■

8 Research on recent immigration in Portugal, from the Chamber of Ethics and the Centre of Studies and Opinion Research of the Portuguese Catholic University.

9 Report on Immigration by the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities. www.acime.gov.pt

10 Portuguese Association of Insurance Companies.

11 National Institute of Statistics. www.ine.pt/censos2001/censos.asp

12 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Declaration of Salamanca, Decree-Law 319/91.

13 Declaration of Madrid (2002).

14 *Jornal de Notícias*, 10 December 2003.

15 Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima. www.apav.pt