PERSONAL HISTORY

Portugal, declassified

Fifty years on, a journalist returns to Lisbon and digs up his confidential state file.

Demonstration in Porto on April 25, 1983 | Henrique Matos, GNU Free Documentation License

BY DENNIS REDMONT

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Portugal today is a thriving democracy. But 50 years ago it was a police state. As a reporter for the Associated Press from 1965 to 1967, I was constantly tracked and bullied by the political police for my coverage of the brutal regime of dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. The Portuguese were kept in the dark; the local media crippled by strict censorship.

My mail was steamed open. My phone conversations were meticulously recorded and translated. A squad of eight goons tried to grab me on Praca Da Alegria (Happiness Square) at my Associated Press office in Lisbon, before I found refuge at the U.S. Embassy. Later, I was personally interrogated by the head of Portugal's political police (PIDE), which had assassinated some of its opponents, and jailed and tortured others.

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A half century later, I was poring over my declassified police file at the Torre do Tombo archive located at the Lisbon University Campus, where students once demonstrated for greater freedoms like an end to censorship and allowing political activities.

My dossier, No 4287 ci (2) NT 7338, was neatly wrapped inside a maroon ribbon and a cardboard folder. Each sheet was numbered with a hand-written serial figure inserted. Nearby, other researchers quietly thumbed through books and files in the tinted-glass library. The purring air conditioning gave the scene a feeling of unreality. Glancing out the window, I saw freshman students walk by in their traditional black capes.

The dossier contained the telexed reports I had sent out to the world — reports of university students being mistreated by political police because of their struggle for greater freedom and democracy.

Another item that had apparently infuriated the government was an article I wrote about Portugal's "secret" colonial wars in five African "territories." The smoldering guerrilla conflicts in 1966 were killing more young drafted soldiers than Americans in Vietnam at the time.

Censorship was so prevalent that the government designated "minders" to every local newspaper, who excised any reference to student unrest or guerrilla warfare in Africa, and even flagged any literary articles deemed unfavorable to the regime.

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The only way the Portuguese could find out what was happening in their own country was to read the foreign press, which nearly always reached the Lisbon kiosks.

And after my reports on the students were printed in newspapers abroad, young people resumed anti-regime demonstrations. The government was anxious for me to reveal my sources.

One of my dispatches told of two students who were tortured by police and forced to freeze in a "statue position," like the prisoners of Abu Ghraib would be four decades later. One swallowed her broken eyeglasses in an apparent suicide attempt and the other was pushed — or jumped — from the first floor of the prison. These stories never saw the light of the day in the Portuguese press, but they "lived" abroad and came back home through the grapevine.

I kept leafing through the folder, and found a letter and envelope from my Columbia University classmate from France, a country that hosted many of the Portuguese opposition members. The letter, still in its original blue airmail envelope, was translated with many mistakes. Abbreviations like "J School" or "JH, one of our professors" were taken by the police translator and taken to be some sort of code. The term "Kudos" had also been flagged — the PIDE translator had obviously not known its meaning. The word was circled in red on the presumption that my widely reported interrogation with the political police was being followed up by the Paris-based opposition. I read the letter for the first time a few weeks ago.

> "“Without Europe's embrace, democracy would have shipwrecked in Portugal and elsewhere" – former Portuguese President Mario Soares

Yet another document showed the government's anger about my trip, in 1965, to the site of Humberto Delgado's murder. The general had defied Salazar in a contested 1958 election and then fled abroad. A Portuguese fact-finding commission officially concluded in 1981 that Delgado had been bludgeoned to death with his secretary in a "sting operation" by PIDE and Salazar's ally, Spanish dictator Francisco Franco's police.

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The murder site lies on the border between Spain and Portugal, and I went with a young lawyer called Mario Soares. He would later become prime minister in 1983 and then President of the Portuguese Republic for a decade in 1986.

Soares, fearing for his life, took refuge in France in 1968. He returned to Portugal in 1974 in triumph, after the April 25 "Carnation Revolution" put an end to the longest serving regime of Europe, which had begun its rule in 1933. In just two days, with scarcely any bloodshed, captains and colonels marched on Lisbon, swept out the remains of the regime and sent Prime Minister Marcello Caetano into exile in Brazil. Salazar had died in 1970 but the system survived another four years.

The Carnation Revolution's victims were few: PIDE (then DGS) agents killed four civilians and wounded a few others, while some agents escaped abroad. One PIDE agent was shot.

Although Henry Kissinger predicted that Portugal would turn irretrievably Communist after the coup, the country pulled itself together, applied to the European Community and eventually confined the Communist Party to a small — yet active — political force.

In a way, Europe offered safe haven to Portugal, as it did for Spain and Greece. It allowed a vibrant democracy to grow on the ground where strong regimes had previously snuffed out free debate.

Today, Soares is 91 years old and he is the last historic European Socialist still alive from the Mitterrand generation.

"Without Europe's embrace, democracy would have shipwrecked in Portugal and elsewhere," he told me recently. "And the constant flow of information abroad during the hard years was key to our rebirth."

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On October 4, Soares and 9.7 million eligible Portuguese go to the polls to choose between the governing Social Democratic party and the Socialists but they also may split their ballot by voting for the Popular Party or the most resistant Communist Party in Western Europe, which has remained as fiercely doctrinaire as it was in the days of its clandestine opposition of Salazar.

Unlike Greece — with its five elections in six years — Portugal has had four years of political stability under a center-right government. It has fully cooperated with international lenders and leads in the polls. The center left Socialist party has opposed the bailout for "excessive austerity."

But as I left the archive, and walked among streets clogged with hundreds of international visitors on the tail end of the summer tourist boom, it was comforting to see that a low-key political debate was taking the country from the brink of default back to growth.

The Portuguese have not forgotten about their past. They endlessly debate the dark days of the Salazar "Estado Novo" in their now uncensored media — like the mournful national Fado music that echoes in the country's heart.

But the Portuguese have also transitioned to a new level of normality. As I walked up to the National Pantheon across town overlooking the sparkling estuary of the Tagus River, there were the imposing tombs of the "national treasures": not far from the legendary Fado singer Amalia Rodrigues and the Mozambican born Portuguese soccer player Eusebio, hero of the 1966 World Cup, lies buried the murdered General Delgado — now a hero.

Dennis F. Redmont, now an executive at the Council for U.S. and Italy in Rome, reported on the Mediterranean area for the AP for four decades.

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