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Lisbon Communists Gain Quietly

Published: **The New York Times** May 27, 1974

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LISBON, May 26—When the Communist party came into the open after the military coup a month ago, it had a prison-hardened prestigious leader, dedicated party workers, a loyal following among various groups from farm hands to bank employees, and a doctrine for all of Portugal's problems.

Today, the consensus, here is that the Communists are Portugal's best-prepared and best organized political group. Next spring, when national elections promised by the military junta are to be held, the Communist party may well turn out also to be the most successful vote getter.

The decision by the military junta, led by Gen. Antonio de Spínola, to include Communists in the new provisional government has given their party new power base.

'Fervor' at Airport.

"Spínola just couldn't keep the Communists out of the government," said a Western diplomat who had gone to Lisbon airport to witness the return of the Communist party leader, Alvaro Cunhal, from exile soon after the coup.

"There was an atmosphere of almost religious fervor at the airport," the diplomat recalled. The Portuguese Communists are a tightly knithighly indoctrinated movement. They have fought against the right-wing dictatorship with teeth and nails from the beginning."

General — now President — Spínola may also have thought that it was much better to have such a formidable political force in the government rather than outside it.

The Communists are now grappling with one of Portugal's main troubles: the strikes and other labor unrest that have broken out all over the country since the authoritarian government of Premier Marcello Caetano and its dreaded secret police were deposed.

Restraint Is Noted

The Communist leadership is telling the workers clamoring for higher wages, shorter hours and better conditions that the strike weapon is most efficient if it is not used too often.

The decision to suspend violent action by its revolutionary arm made by Mr. Cunhal, is believed to have had the approval of Moscow, where he has long been regarded with favor.

The marked restraint of the Portuguese Communists is being observed with mounting interest all over Western Europe, especially in Italy, whose large Communist party has been kept out of government.

Relations With Guerrillas

The Communist party in neighboring Spain, still clandestine, and its exiled leader, Santiago Carillo, are much less amenable to Moscow's guidance, and are rather friendly toward Peking.

Ultraleftists and Maoists here say that the strong pro-Soviet and implicit anti-Chinese stand of Mr. Cunhal's party explains why it has no close relations with the guerrilla movements in the Portuguese territories in Africa. The rebels in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea seem more impressed by Maoism.

Mr. Cunhal himself has apparently devoted most of his energies to party organization in metropolitan Portugal. During a stretch in solitary confinement in a Portuguese prison from 1950 to 1958 he seems to have done much thinking about his country and about how his party would tackle her problems.

The slogan that greeted the 10,000 people attending the Communist party's first mass meeting in Lisbon Friday night was "For a Better Life." The official Communist doctrine for Portugal at this moment is pragmatic: improve the living conditions of the workers, which have long been among the worst in Western Europe.

The party does not now call for general nationalization of large enterprises and banks. It gives one to understand that small and medium businesses have a right to exist, and warns that a broad wave of strikes and "exaggerated" demands for higher wages and shorter hours would damage such enterprises, favoring the big "monopolies."

The Communist party calls for an end to the "colonial wars," but has not come out for immediate independence for the African territories, as do the ultraleftist groups here.

While Mr. Cunhal served time in jail or was living in exile in Paris, Prague and Moscow, he always managed to stay in close touch with a small but devoted Communist apparatus of perhaps fewer than 1,000 people.

One of Mr. Cunhal's top lieutenants, Avelino António Pacheco Goncalves, is now Labor Minister. A bank employe from Oporto, he succeeded in building the bank

workers' union into a Communist-dominated organization under the noses of the secret police.

Rural Influence

By similar conspiratorial methods, the Communist party also gained much influence during its clandestine era among the rural population in Portugal's south and among students.

The party today says that it had for years also been infiltrating the armed forces. However, no Communists appear to have been among the junior officers who banded together in the "armed forces movement" that engineered last month's coup.

General Spínola in his book, "Portugal and the Future," wrote that no Portuguese could tolerate his country's becoming "a Soviet thorn in the side of the West." The officers' movement has made it plain that it wants to help build a free Western-type society in Portugal.

Today, the white-haired Mr. Cunha!, who is 60 years old, keeps insisting that the Communists must closely cooperate with the armed forces.

"For us, it is a question of life or death," he warns.