

# Rethinking the role of the Portuguese Communist Party in the transition to democracy

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## Abstract

*Lying within the ambit of the theory on transition studies and party development, this article focuses on the political mobilisation and organisational development of the Portuguese Communist Party between 1974 and 1976. Using in-depth interviews and quantitative data, this paper demonstrates that the constraints and the opportunities at the institutional level – particularly with respect to the role of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA – Movimento das Forças Armadas) – are a key element towards achieving an understanding of the party's strategy during the different phases of democratisation. The main conclusions underline two points: the first is the importance of the distribution of power within the MFA in influencing the role played by the PCP in the transition, while the second is the subordination of the social power to the institutional integration.*

## Keywords

Portuguese  
Communist Party  
Portugal  
democratisation  
party organisation  
party development  
communist parties

## Introduction

The military coup that took place in Lisbon on 25 April 1974 overthrew the authoritarian regime built by Salazar and paved the way to the installation of the new democratic regime. The *coup d'état* was led by the Armed Forces Movement (MFA – Movimento das Forças Armadas) which maintained significant powers within the new institutions. In the early days of the new regime, the military power was based on the National Salvation Junta (JSN – Junta de Salvação Nacional), whereas the provisional governments, which included the leaders of the main political parties, had only the function of implementing the decisions taken by the JSN or by the MFA Programme Coordinating Committee (CCP – Comissão Coordenadora do Programa). The political parties were to play only a minor role in the political system, at least until the first democratic elections held in April 1975. In fact, the MFA programme only recognised political associations, while political parties were formally legalised only with the law 594–595 approved in November 1974. As a consequence, this distribution of power favoured the subordination of the new political parties to the military elite (Sousa 1983; Sánchez Cervelló 1993; Schmitter 1999).

One of the main characteristics of the Portuguese transition to democracy is that the provisional governments were not accountable to a regular parliament or constituent and this allowed the military to hold power without any democratic restrictions (Linz and Stepan 1996: 120–1). The MFA benefited from the revolutionary legitimacy which constituted the

1. The progressive group had the USSR as its reference and was identified with (and supported by) the PCP, while the radical group was inspired by the Cuban and Chinese regimes and was organized around Colonel Otelo Saraiva do Carvalho, commander of the Continental Operations Command (COPCON, Comando Operacional do Continente), which was a military strike force created by the MFA.

basis for its institutional power. Moreover, the military elite consolidated its power through the signature of the first pact between the MFA and the political parties (March 1975), which was to influence the constitution-making environment. Only after the election of the constituent assembly did a clash between revolutionary legitimacy and electoral legitimacy emerge, paving the way to the conflict between the Communist party (PCP – Partido Comunista Português) and the other two main parties – the Socialist party (PS – Partido Socialista) and the Popular Democratic Party (PPD – Partido Popular Democrático) – that prompted the establishment of a liberal democracy.

It is important to underline that the MFA's primary goal was to put an end to the colonial war and that the military coup was above all a negative 'motion of censure' (Jalali 2007). In fact, there was no agreement on the type of new regime, and the military elite had very diverse views about the characteristics of the new institutions. Even though the programme of the MFA set forth the three main objectives – democratisation, decolonisation and development – there was no agreement about the means, short-term policies or timetable of the transition process. These divisions did not take long to emerge. From the early days of the transition it is possible to distinguish between, at least, three different factions: the group organised around Spínola, who advocated Portugal's control over its colonies and limited internal democratisation; the left groups which included both progressive and radical exponents, favouring the installation of a socialist or popular democracy;<sup>1</sup> and finally, the moderate sector that supported a regime type similar to Western liberal democracies. Several authors have stressed that different coalitions may emerge in the process of democratisation, including a wide range of military and civilian actors. In the Portuguese case the various shifts in the internal balance of power within the military elite not only characterised the democratisation process but also determined the role played by political parties and the alliances between the different MFA groups and the civilian forces.

The prevalence of the military elite in both the provisional governments and the political parties was confirmed by the institutionalisation of the MFA, which culminated in the creation of the Council of the Revolution (CR – Conselho da Revolução) after the aborted right-wing coup of 11 March 1975. The process of the MFA institutionalisation aimed not only to consolidate the military power but also to limit the divisions within the military elite. However, the conflicts within the MFA deepened with the first democratic elections and further radicalised after that when the PS and PSD withdrew their support from the government (July 1975). During the 'hot summer', the military moderate elements became the majority within the MFA and took control over important sectors of the Portuguese army, forcing the prime minister, Vasco Gonçalves to resign (Table 1). The final step of the revolutionary process took place with the aborted left-wing coup of 25 November 1975 which paved the way to the installation of a liberal democracy. This process culminated in the first legislative elections, held in April 1976, where the PS obtained a plurality majority and was able to form the first constitutional government.

This article aims at analysing the role of the PCP in the democratisation process, focusing on the period between 1974 and 1976. Relative to

Prime minister	From	To	Members of government		
			Total	Military	PCP
Palma Carlos	15 May 1974	9 July 1974	15	8	2
Vasco Gonçalves	18 July 1974	30 September 1974	17	6	1
Vasco Gonçalves	1 October 1974	24 March 1975	17	6	1
Vasco Gonçalves	26 March 1975	7 August 1975	19	8	2
Vasco Gonçalves	8 August 1975	12 September 1975	18	5	1
Pinheiro de Azevedo	19 September 1975	23 July 1976	18	7	1

*Table 1: Portuguese provisional governments (1974–76).*

previous works on this subject, this article is distinctive in two ways. First, it seeks to examine the communist strategy through a theoretical and analytical perspective. Second, it considers quantitative data regarding the communist mobilisation which helps to illustrate and understand the instruments and the objectives adopted by the PCP. Thus, by considering in-depth interviews and new empirical data regarding the PCP's political mobilisation, this paper contributes to shedding more light on the communist organisational strategy and the role it played in the political system. In the next section the main literature on party formation and development will be considered, as well as the role of political parties in the transitions to democracy. In doing this, the particular character of the Communist Party will be stressed with regard to both the other main Portuguese parties and the democratisation experienced by other southern European countries. The third section focuses on the role played by the PCP within the institutional context, considering the relationship with the military elite and inter-party relations. Then, the attention will be centred on the organisational features of party development. Finally the last section will deal with communist mobilisation in the different phases of the democratisation. The main contention of this article is that, although the PCP has been seen as a 'different' party regarding its organisation and its internal functioning, the mobilisation prompted by the PCP has only played a secondary role, while the priority was the alliance with the MFA and the achievement of social and economic transformation through public (i.e. state) and institutional resources.

### **On the formation of parties and the transition to democracy: lessons from theory and history**

The third wave of democratisations inspired many studies about transitions to democracy. Despite the diversity of theories and approaches applied to the study of democratisation, an underlying feature crucial to understanding and analysing the path to democracy is the importance of the role played by political parties. As the participation of the civil society opens, political parties become the main subject of intermediation between institutions and citizens, allowing the expression of different interests and demands into the political sphere (Sartori 1976).

New democracies are different from established ones with regard to the functions developed by political parties. The widening of political participation and, at the same time, the opening of the electoral competition led the parties to give priority to the winning of offices and to gaining power within the institutions rather than establishing strong links with the civil society. It is important to stress that in the Portuguese democratisation the new parties that emerged in 1974 had very few resources at their disposal. All the parties had to seek a mass support for electoral purposes and this accentuated the lack of clearly defined social bases of support. As a consequence, the organisational style adopted by these parties was characterised by 'weak partisan and strong electoral linkages, the reduced relevance of party members, the predominance of professionals and party leaderships, the importance of public funding and the parties' assimilation with the state' (Van Biezen 2005: 168–9). As far as the functions developed by political parties are concerned, in the new south European democracies institutional integration had prevailed over the function of political integration. Institutional integration is developed essentially by representation mechanisms, especially through the procedural role played by political parties in order to coordinate and control the institutional framework. On the other hand, political integration includes different activities aiming to organise, influence and control the behaviour of individuals and groups. This function is developed principally by the mass party type through different strategies, such as an ideological legitimacy that creates collective incentives, a strong organisational structure or an intensive activity of mobilisation (Bartolini and Mair 2001).

Unlike other communist parties of southern Europe the PCP had to face a huge dilemma concerning the balance between institutional and social integration. In fact, the PCP – as the main Portuguese party to emerge after the fall of the authoritarian regime – aimed at building a mass support, not only for electoral purposes, but also for its own legitimisation and implantation in Portuguese society. It also had the opportunity to share power and remain in office given the ideological and programmatic proximity to relevant sectors of the armed forces. This leads us to reconsider the function of political and institutional integration developed by the PCP, and the impact of the transition on party organisational features. It is true that in relation to the other parties the PCP could benefit from backward legitimacy from its clandestine organisation that operated during Salazar's *Estado Novo*. Nonetheless, it had to combine the building of its own identity with competition from the main parties that participated in the provisional governments: particularly with the Socialist Party.

The PCP had thus to choose between control over the institutions and social power (Schmitter 1999). These were two alternative strategies: even if the choice regarding the regime type was the primary issue that political parties and the military elite had to solve, the PCP was able to penetrate different social organisations through state control over some basic sectors, in particular with the nationalisations following 11 March 1975. In this sense, the literature on Portuguese democratisation emphasises the classic Leninist strategy pursued by the PCP: controlling mass organisations – the trade unions – to act as a transmission belt for the party (Cunha 1997; Maxwell 1986). However, a deeper analysis of the mobilisation strategy

followed by the PCP in the different phases of the transition to democracy can illustrate the nature of the relationship between the two aspects; that is, whether the communists aimed to control social power as an autonomous resource or whether it was dependent and subordinated to the institutional role played by the party.

The PCP was characterised by an ideological orthodoxy and a strong organisation, intended to link party members to the long-term party goals. Compared to other southern European communist parties it did not experience any programmatic or strategic evolution. Thus, most analysts adopt the assumption that the PCP, as was the case with other Leninist parties, should give priority to the political integration function and the building of a mass party. Several authors agree with the exception of the PCP as a mass party with a strong institutionalisation when compared to the other main Portuguese parties, considered essentially as catch-all parties (Lopes 2002; Van Biezen 2003). This paper will contribute not only to reconsidering the role played by the PCP in the transition to democracy but also to analysing the process of party formation and the strategy of adaptation adopted between 1974 and 1976. The main strand this article will follow is that, despite belonging to the communist ideological family, the role played by the party is necessarily interrelated with the political context, and that party strategy cannot be seen independently from the structural and institutional features of the environment in which it is embedded.

### **The relationship between the PCP and the military elite**

The relationship between the PCP and the military elite went through different phases during the transition to democracy. The first period began with the fall of the authoritarian regime and ended with the withdrawal of Spínola from the presidency of the Republic. The second phase ended with the failed military coup of 11 March 1975, while the third overlapped with the 'hot summer' (*verão quente*) and culminated on 25 November 1975. The last period began with the backlash against the aborted coup and terminated with the first parliamentary elections, which were held during April 1976.

The role played by the military elite in the fall of the authoritarian regime led the PCP to reconsider the role of the armed forces in the new regime. According to *levantamento nacional* (national uprising) theory – which was elaborated during the party's sixth congress, held in 1965 – the fall of the authoritarian regime was to be carried out by two components: the military and the popular movement. However, after the military coup the MFA was considered not only as one of the components of the MFA-People Alliance (*Aliança Povo-MFA*), but also as the engine of the revolutionary process, and the PCP's initial mistrust of the military was progressively substituted by an unconditional support.

The first phase, which followed the fall of the authoritarian regime, was characterised by the PCP's support for the MFA against General Spínola. The communist opposition to the new president was determined not only by an ideological incompatibility but also by a defensive attitude. In effect, during the early months of the democratisation there was a great uncertainty regarding the trajectory of the transition and there was no certainty yet that the PCP would be legalised. This contributed to the maintenance of a parallel and secret hierarchical organisation within the party, which was

2. Both problems were essentially related to the state intervention in civil society and the degree of control exercised by the PCP over the public administration and labour organisations.

set up during the opposition to the authoritarian regime and consisted of a specific structure that linked the party's leaders with senior ranking military officials. The alliance between the PCP and the MFA was based on an implicit exchange: on the one hand, the PCP had to face the opposition of Spínola and to guarantee its own survival; on the other, the MFA needed the communists' support not only for their backward legitimacy – as the Portuguese Democratic Movement/Democratic Electoral Commissions (MDP/CDE – Movimento Democrático Português/Comissões Democráticas Eleitorais) – but also because it was the party with the stronger organisational structure. While the conflicts within the military elite increased around the problem of decolonisation, the PCP was able to consolidate its alliance with the MFA through support for the military and participation in the first and second provisional governments.

Spínola was forced to resign as president after his attempted 'silent majority' demonstration of 28 September 1974, which sought to ensure control of the MFA and influence the decolonisation process. However, the demise of Spínola did not solve the problem within the military elite: the powers granted to the Continental Operations Command (COPCON – Comando Operacional do Continente), the ambiguity of the MFA programme and the conflict between hierarchical and political criteria regulating military governance were the main factors contributing to the maintenance of significant divisions within the MFA (Rato 2000). Moreover, the political parties remained subordinated to the military elite which held a veto power over the most important decisions and policies at government and military level. While the socialists and the centre-right parties were sceptical about the role of the MFA, military dominance was endorsed by the communist leaders. In fact, the PCP started to support the CCP as the main institutional centre of power, trying to co-opt the more progressive sectors of the MFA.

During the second phase of the transition, economic policies and the problem of the organisation of labour representation were important factors of conflict within both the military and the political parties.<sup>2</sup> Yet the most important issue that split the MFA was its institutionalisation and the timing of the first democratic elections. This debate revealed the communist position regarding the role the military should play in the new regime. In fact, during a speech by its leader Álvaro Cunhal in November 1974 claiming that the participation of the military elite within the political system was necessary for the elaboration of the constitution and the maintenance of the new democratic rights and freedoms, the PCP was the first to propose the MFA's institutionalisation. Thus, the communist leader suggested two hypotheses: the first consisted of establishing a quota of military delegates in the constituent assembly, while the second was to set up an agreement between the parties and the MFA in order to define the main principles and direction of the constitution (Cunhal 1975: 124). This stance marked the beginning of the alignment between the communists and the military faction led by the prime minister (*gonçalvistas*). According to the communist leadership, the programmatic and ideological orientation expressed by Vasco Gonçalves was the only way to retain military unity and cohesion, ensuring control over the transition and the continuation of the revolutionary process.

However, it was only after the aborted military coup of 11 March 1975 that a radical left-wing majority, led by Gonçalves, came to clearly dominate the MFA. The coup stemmed from the opposition of the more conservative military groups to the institutionalisation of the MFA. The aborted coup had the effect of the withdrawal from power of the more conservative elements of the armed forces, and the establishment of a convergence between the moderate and progressive groups of the MFA with respect to the main reforms required. This alliance was able to overcome the stalemate at policy-making level by implementing a set of radical economic and social changes. Thus a programme of nationalisations was undertaken, which affected banks and insurance companies, and the government adopted measures against *latifúndio* (large landowners) in the Alentejo. This corresponded to a great extent with the PCP's ideological and programmatic orientations. The state became thus an important instrument through which the communists could control different sectors of civil society. The PCP could benefit both directly and indirectly from the radical policies adopted by the government and from the predominance of the progressive alliance within the MFA. Directly in that – because this alliance allowed the PCP to gain important positions in the media – the communists took control of most state print and broadcast media,<sup>3</sup> the nationalised industries and the labour movement, as well as the state farms and cooperatives of Alentejo; indirectly in that the convergence contributed to strengthening the primacy of revolutionary legitimacy over electoral results and radicalised the military elite through the People-MFA Alliance, which was largely identified with the PCP.

The political consequences of 11 March 1975 were no less important than the economic and social ones. Notwithstanding the divisions within the military elite, the failed coup paved the way for the institutionalisation of the MFA through the creation of the CR.<sup>4</sup> The threat from the conservative military faction allowed the differences between the military officers to be overcome – at least temporarily. At the same time, the period between 11 March and 25 April 1975 marked the strongest convergence between the PCP and the MFA.

Despite the uncertainty of the democratisation process, the democratic elections to the constituent assembly took place on 25 April 1975. These elections were to have a huge impact on the transition because they introduced a democratic legitimacy that hampered the hegemonic claims of the PCP and MFA radicals to revolutionary legitimacy. This conflict made it more difficult for the military elite to find a consensual agreement in order to elaborate and implement a plan to steer the transition to democracy. Several projects were formulated between May and August 1975, aimed at imposing the strategies promoted by each military faction in order to overcome the work of the constituent assembly and to maintain their own influence on the political transition.<sup>5</sup> As the conflicts within the military elite increased and the MFA proved unable to elaborate a coherent and unitary strategy, the support of political parties became more and more indispensable. However, the divisions within the MFA did not coincide with the conflicts between the new political forces. This imperfect overlapping was not only the result of the radical reforms undertaken after the 11 March coup, but also of the increasing influence of the extreme left over some

3. Conflicts between the main political parties took place with the take-over of the Catholic radio station, Rádio Renascença, and the *República* newspaper, which had a strong international impact and contributed to discrediting the PCP.
4. The Council of the Revolution was the MFA's executive organ and retained veto power on all government decisions. See Rezola (2006).
5. The first attempt to strengthen the government and aggregate party support stemmed from the Political Action Plan of June 1975. This plan, which was elaborated by Melo Antunes and Rosa Coutinho, aimed to foster a convergence between the Otelo's populist faction within the MFA and the moderate groups. This was followed by the publication of the MFA-People Alliance Guidance document (*Documento-guia da Aliança Povo-MFA*), which attempted to establish an alliance between the *gonçalvistas* and the radical-left group. Finally, in August the Document of the Nine was published by moderate elements within the MFA, a document that marginalizes Gonçalves' faction within the military elite. This document provoked a reaction from Otelo, who produced the COPCON Document; however, this had no influence on the balance of power within the MFA.

6. As Maxwell (1986: 129, 199) notes, the PCP suppressed Cunhal's critiques of Vasco Gonçalves. This stance represented the end of the communists' support for the prime minister. The complete version was published in Cunhal's collected speeches two years later.

military groups. The mismatch between MFA groups and the political parties led to a radicalisation of their positions and to a decrease in the efficiency and effectiveness of the provisional governments, triggering deep social conflicts throughout the country during the 'hot summer' of 1975.

After the publication of the MFA-People Alliance Guidance document, a shift in the PCP's strategy emerged. It withdrew its support for an intransigent defence of the Gonçalves government, and attempted to consolidate its influence within the CR. This strategy took place, initially, through the effort to establish an agreement between the *gonçalvistas* and *otelistas*, and then between *gonçalvistas* and MFA moderates (the Group of Nine). Despite the ambiguity and the contradictions of the military projects – which reflected the uncertainty of the orientations of the political forces – the PCP supported both the Political Action Plan and the Alliance Guidance document in order to maintain its alliance with the military elite and conserve its influence over the revolutionary process.

The fall of the fourth provisional government, resulting from the withdrawal of the PS and the Social Democratic Party (PSD – Partido Social Democrata) from the executive, paved the way to a huge institutional and political crisis that strengthened communist influence over the government. The divisions between the PCP and the main political parties also affected the correlation of forces within the CR, deepening the conflicts between the *gonçalvist* majority, which wanted to pursue a transition toward a socialist society, and the moderate military groups that called for the creation of a pluralist democratic regime. In this sense, after the radicalisation of the faction led by the prime minister, the party's Central Committee adopted a resolution on 10 August 1975 that proclaimed the importance of the internal unity of the MFA and the possibility of forming new alliances with other military groups.<sup>6</sup> While the communists attempted to avoid isolation in the new institutional context, the document aimed at limiting the radicalisation of the *gonçalvistas* and also represented an effort to negotiate with the Group of Nine to solve the institutional crisis and maintain the main economic and social transformations adopted by previous governments. This strategic adaptation was evidence of the PCP's dependence on the military elite.

During the fifth provisional government, the communist strategy toward the military elite was characterised by ambiguity and contradictions. The PCP seemed to continue to pursue a dual strategy – one in government and one outside. On the one hand, it supported the radicalisation of the process towards a socialist society, while on the other hand it complained about the lack of unity and cohesion between the armed forces and the political parties, favouring cooperation between the main political actors at institutional and governmental level (Cunha 1997: 27; Amaral 1996). However, this interpretation does not take into account the fact that the strengthening of the conflicts within the MFA decreased the institutional legitimacy granted to the PCP from the top: that is, coming from the military elite. From this point of view, the strategy adopted by communist leaders shifted from the close support and identification with the *gonçalvistas* to the establishment of a potential alliance with the moderate military elements in order to maintain their influence over the institutional setting. The uncertainty and the ambiguity of the communist stance can thus be seen as the

result of both projects proposed by the military factions and the instability of the correlation of power within the MFA elite.

After September 1975 the internal reorganisation of the military forces took place through the emergence of a new majority within the MFA that was now supported by the two main political parties – the PS and the PSD. This process was to contribute to the PCP's marginalisation, which culminated with the aborted left-wing coup of 25 November 1975. The failure of this attempt definitively imposed a moderate majority within the MFA through the withdrawal of its more radical elements. This represented a turning point in the communist strategy of adopting a more defensive strategy in order to maintain the revolutionary gains, while continuing to support the role of the military in the political system, as shown by the February 1976 negotiations for the second pact between the MFA and the political parties (Rato 1992).<sup>7</sup> The identification of the revolutionary process and the active military role was still the main point of the PCP's theory and activities.

### **Towards a mass party? The development of the PCP's organisation**

After the fall of the authoritarian regime, the PCP's organisational structure developed from a very incipient to a well-structured and solid organisation, with the PCP emerging as the most powerful party in the country at the time.<sup>8</sup> The PCP could benefit from the clandestine organisation it had maintained within the country throughout the Estado Novo period, through its networks and their penetration in some areas such as the Alentejo and the Lisbon industrial belt. However, when the military coup took place, the communist organisational structure was very weak and poorly developed. Thus, its first task was to enhance its organisation in accordance with the Leninist party model. In the context of the Portuguese transition, this implied that the PCP had to deal with the military elite and the role that the MFA decided to bestow to the new political parties. Despite the ideological influence of communists over several groups within the MFA, there is no evidence of a communist structure existing within the military. Yet the PCP had an informal organisation through which it managed its relationship with the MFA according to geographical and functional criteria. There was one party leader in each military region of the country, and different communist leaders were authorised to deal with senior military officers, just as each military branch had a representative within the party's Central Committee.<sup>9</sup> This structure was the PCP's adaptation to the uncertainty of transition and the role played by the military, and represented a defensive strategy designed to control potential dangers from the environment.

As with other communist parties, the PCP's organisation was established according to the typical Leninist mass party model of democratic centralism. This structure implied the centralisation of many decision-making powers in the party's executive body, and in the general-secretary in particular. The concentration of power in the figure of the party leader was strengthened by important resources at the institutional level, namely its participation in the provisional governments and direct links to senior

7. The first MFA-political party pact, which was signed prior to the constituent elections of 1975, sanctioned the CR's control over the legislature.
8. Only the PCP could maintain a certain degree of organisational continuity, since the other parties were either not created until after the military coup or, as in the case of the PS, did not have a domestic organisation before the 25 April coup.
9. Álvaro Cunhal had the right to deal with officials of the most senior ranks, the generals and admirals, while Jaime Serra and Raimundo Narciso were authorized to maintain contact with lower-ranking officers.

	CC		Political	
	effective	substitute	Commission	Secretariat
VI congress (1965)	19	7	—	—
VII congress (1974)	22	14	10	4
VIII congress (1976)	54	36	13	7

Sources: Pereira (1989: 89), Avante! (1974).

Table 2: Size of the main PCP bodies.

10. While considering PCP membership, we should also take into account members of the MDP/CDE, which was the PCP's main ally. Unfortunately, however, no systemic research has focused on the organisation of this party and its strategy towards the PCP.

military officers. As a consequence, the party could display a strong unity, cohesion and discipline (Cunha 1997: 33; Lopes 2002: 62). The party's seventh congress, which was held in September 1974, confirmed Cunhal's control over the coalition, while at the following congress, in 1976, the co-optation of several members into the main national party bodies had the effect of both increasing the number of their members and of reinforcing the party leader's authority (see Table 2).

The increase in the number of party members led the party to recruit more middle-rank cadres who could instruct the newcomers. Party activities had two main objectives: to provide political and ideological information and preparation and to include new members in one of the PCP's parallel organisations, such as the Communist Students' League (UEC – União dos Estudantes Comunistas) or the Democratic Women's Movement (MDM – Movimento Democrático das Mulheres), in order to control and discipline their activity. Even while the party's bureaucracy probably grew less quickly than its membership, it had an important role in mobilizing and socializing new members. This was even more important when the rigid criteria of communist recruitment compared to that of other parties is taken into consideration: the grassroots had not only rights but also duties towards the party – to participate in party activities and strengthen its presence in civil society (Van Biezen 1998).

With regards the trend of party membership the PCP registered a steady increase in party members, which was also due to the support of its parallel organisations.<sup>10</sup> The sharpest rise took place during the first year of the transition, but it continued after the summer of 1975 when anti-communist mobs endangered local activities (Table 3). Overall, compared to the other Portuguese parties, the PCP was the strongest party and was able to convert voters into members: this demonstrated the communists' ability to install a sense of community and participation that linked members to the party through solidarity and purposeful incentives. The level of loyalty in PCP ranks was much stronger than that in other parties. In fact, party membership rates further confirm the PS's and PSD's lack of roots within the electorate (M/E ratio – total party membership taken as a percentage of the total electorate), and amongst the party's voters (M/V ratio – party membership taken as a percentage of the party's vote). Again, the PCP shows a notably high membership and stands out from the other main parties, with a rate of members to electorate that is substantially greater than that of the

Date	PCP			PS			PPD		
	members	M/E	M/V	members	M/E	M/V	members	M/E	M/V
April 1974	2–3000	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
July 1974	14,593	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
October 1974	30,000	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
December 1974	—	—	—	35,971	—	—	11,260	—	—
May 1975	100,000	1.54	14.0	—	1.26	3.8	—	0.31	1.4
December 1975	—	—	—	80,594	—	—	21,022	—	—
November 1976	115,000	1.77	14.5	91,562	1.41	4.8	25,630	0.39	1.9

Sources: Pereira (1989: 82); Martins (1994) and Stock (1989). M/E and M/V author's own calculations.

Table 3: PCP, PS and PPD party membership.

other three main parties. In particular, the PCP's M/E ratio was three times greater than that of the PPD and about 25 per cent higher than that of the PS, while the figures for the M/V ratio show the difference is even greater.

The PCP consolidated its organisation throughout the country through a process of penetration (Lopes 2002). During the authoritarian regime, the PCP developed a strong opposition to the regime in the industrial areas and in the Alentejo. This was the result of a long-term process that stemmed from two factors. First, from the 1940s the PCP was able to increase its penetration within the labour movement, especially after the formation of Intersindical in 1970. Consequently, it established a strong support base amongst workers in the Lisbon and Setúbal industrial belt, as well as within the heavy industries. Second, an important base of communist support was established in the southern Alentejo, around the towns of Beja and Évora, where a proletarian agricultural workforce was employed in large farming estates (*latifúndia*).

The basic party unit – the cell within factories and organisations – developed during the first months of the transition, reached its peak in mid-1975. In 1974, the PCP introduced just one organisational change in the new statute, which consisted of its territorial adaptation to the administrative division of the country. In April 1974 only four district committees existed, while from July the party began creating organisational structures at the regional level (DOR – Delegado Organizador da Região) as well as at the local. In December 1974 the communist organisation already had seven DOR and 18 district committees covering the entire country (Cunha 1992).

Another aspect of the PCP's organisational development was the creation of labour centres. From a quantitative point of view, there was a gradual upward trend until July 1975 when anti-communist mobs emerged in the north and centre of the country, forcing the party to close some local offices and labour centres. With respect to geographical distribution, the opening of labour centres followed the general pattern of the party's territorial penetration, obtaining stronger organisation in the Lisbon area and the Alentejo (see Table 4). Comparing

Districts	Number of labour centres	%	Weighted labour centres	% vote (1975)	% mobilisation (Nov 74–Mar 75)
Aveiro	15	5.08	12.2	1.4	4.7
Beja	33	11.18	83.8	7.1	7.5
Braga	10	3.38	7.3	1.8	7.3
Bragança	5	1.69	14.2	0.4	2.2
Castelo Branco	5	1.69	9.8	1.2	1.9
Coimbra	9	3.05	10.3	2.1	8.5
Évora	15	5.08	41.3	6.7	7.2
Faro	18	6.10	32.1	3.6	4.1
Guarda	—	—	0.0	0.6	1.9
Leiria	13	4.40	16.0	2.2	6.5
Lisboa	51	17.28	13.4	34.0	7.0
Portalegre	20	6.77	69.4	2.5	4.5
Porto	18	6.10	5.8	7.9	13.1
Santarém	31	10.50	32.9	6.3	7.4
Setúbal	28	9.49	23.7	20.2	4.3
Viana do Castelo	3	1.01	5.6	0.8	2.6
Vila Real	11	3.72	20.6	0.6	5.7
Viseu	10	3.38	11.8	0.8	3.8
Total	295	100	—	100	100

Source: Avante! (1975) and author's calculations.

Note: The number of labour centres is weighted by considering the inhabitants in each district in 1975 in data from the National Institute of Statistics (INE). In the last column mobilisation considers all the activities (demonstrations, rallies and local meetings) organised by the PCP during that period.

Table 4: Communist labour centres (25 April 1975).

data from the communist mobilisation and the share of the vote obtained by the PCP in the 1975 elections in each district it is possible to note the weak correlation between communist activity and the party's electoral basis. This fact shows not only the PCP's effort to expand its geographical and social penetration, but also the limits of this strategy, which was unsuccessful, even before the beginning of the anti-communist mobilisation.

Besides the party organisation, the PCP was also supported by other unitary organisations that emerged from the rubble of the authoritarian regime. As well as the MDP/CDE, which established itself as a political party in September 1974, these included the MDM, the Young Workers' Movement (MJT – Movimento da Juventude Trabalhadora) and the communist student and youth associations. As in the case of the main trade union (Intersindical), these organisations acted as the PCP's transmission belt, which strengthened the purposeful incentives for activists within the party, reinforcing their participation and mobilisation. However, this kind of organisational encapsulation was to prompt the reaction of other political parties, further reinforcing the evidence of a hegemonic attempt by the PCP to control the transition process – particularly after the first democratic elections.

## Between institutional and social power: the communist mobilisation in the transition to democracy

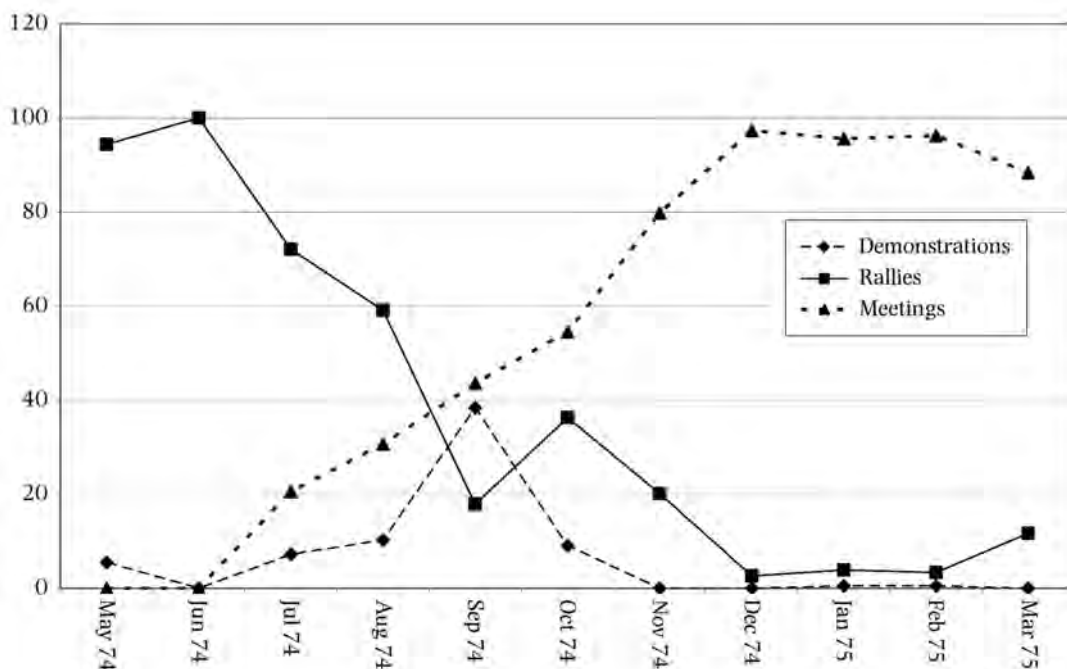
After the fall of the authoritarian regime the PCP attempted to consolidate its organisational structure and to develop the political integration of its members through different kinds of activities. The main efforts were concentrated in the organisation of demonstrations, rallies and local meetings.<sup>11</sup> During the first months following the revolution, the PCP attempted to strengthen its mobilisation with rallies throughout the country, often taking place when a labour centre was inaugurated or with the opening of a local party branch. At the same time, between May and October 1974 the demonstrations were characterised by a unitary spirit that reflected the participation of the new political parties in the provisional governments. However, from a very early moment this collaboration showed its limits: in fact, it was an alliance by default, which took place only when the main parties (re)acted against the solutions promoted by Spínola on controversial issues – such as the problem of decolonisation – but it lacked any common strategic or programmatic basis. From the beginning, the alliance between the PCP and the MDP emerged as the only stable party interaction. This caused a problem for the latter, which was portrayed by the PS and the PSD as the PCP's puppet. By the same token, it contributed towards consolidating the image of the PCP as a party that was pursuing a hegemonic strategy in the new regime.

During the first months of the transition to democracy, the dynamics of communist mobilisation demonstrated important features that shed light on the PCP's strategy and the links between the party and civil society. First, between May and October 1974 the PCP strengthened its territorial presence and attempted to differentiate its activities with a more balanced distribution of demonstrations, rallies and local meetings (Figure 1). This trend reached its peak in September when the number of meetings and demonstrations overtook the number of rallies. Second, while the demonstrations reflected events at the national level, the organisation of rallies and local meetings followed the logic of penetration that the PCP pursued independently of other political and military forces.

If we look at the period following the party congress of October 1974, the underlying feature of communist mobilisation is the high number of local meetings and rallies the party organised. This was due to the discussion of the two most important problems of the policy agenda, which concerned trade union organisation and economic reforms. In fact, in January 1975 a conflict between the moderates and the PCP broke out as a result of the party's attempt to establish a single union confederation (*unicidade sindical*). Looking at the geographical distribution of communist activities, the pattern seems to reflect an offensive strategy: not only did the PCP want to consolidate its structures in its strongholds, but it also looked to expand in some northern areas (see Table 4). Yet these efforts reflected the limits of communist penetration, as shown by the low level of mobilisation in some districts, particularly in Bragança, Castelo Branco, Guarda and Viana do Castelo.

At the same time, the PCP could develop and strengthen the function of political integration and mobilisation through its parallel organisations and the trade unions. The popular movement was, according to communist

11. This section is based on data collected from the official communist newspapers, *Avante!* and *O Militante*, for the period 1974–6. More than 2000 activities are contained in a data set organized by geographical distribution and type of mobilisation.



Source: *Avante!* (1974–5), author's calculations.

Figure 1: PCP mobilisation, May 1974–March 1975 (per cent).

ideology, one of the basic components of the revolutionary process and the party had to incorporate the activists in one of its organisations. These types of activity were also supported by the MDP, which worked with the PCP in their efforts to control different categories of workers. From January 1975 the two parties developed activities that were designed to organise meetings of workers and agricultural labourers – especially in the Alentejo. This kind of mobilisation sought not only to achieve vertical control of organisations and citizens, but also to force the government to adopt policies against monopoly capital and the landowners. Even though this strategy enhanced the political integration of its members, the PCP was unable to expand its core support, which remained anchored in its traditional strongholds.

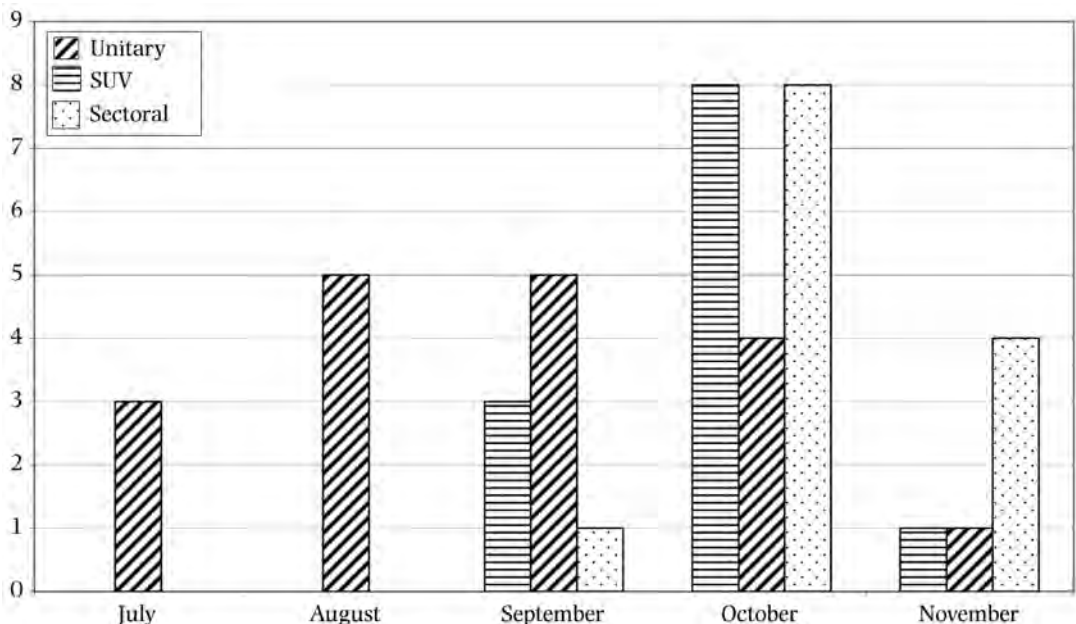
During the 'hot summer' two factors characterised the PCP's mobilisation strategy. The first was the beginning of anti-communist movements in the north. The second was the use of demonstrations as the main pattern of inter-party relationships after the withdrawal of PS and PSD support for the government (Palacios Cerezales 2003). On the one hand, local communist leaders adopted a defensive attitude over the conflicts with conservative and right-wing forces in the north and centre of the country that intensified throughout July and August 1975 and which continued until January 1976. On the other, the PCP attempted to use its organisational strength to influence the forces within the main political parties through the organisation of a series of demonstrations.

After the shift in the distribution of power within the MFA and the fragmentation of the forces of the left, the PCP sought to organise different

kinds of mobilisation (demonstrations and strikes, etc.) on its own, whilst trying both to invert the correlation of forces within the military elite and protect the revolution's main conquests. During this phase, the PCP participated in three different types of demonstrations. Firstly there were the unitary ones involving parties and movements of the extreme left. Then there were thematic demonstrations, which were based on specific policies or issues. Finally, the PCP supported demonstrations organised by the Soldiers United Will Win movement (SUV – Soldados Unidos Vencerão).<sup>12</sup> Between July and November the PCP concentrated its action in organizing unitary demonstrations, while the mobilisation in support of SUV and on specific issues reached a peak during October (see Figure 2). Although the degree of mobilisation remained high throughout the period, in order to influence the political crisis and the distribution of power within the MFA an important change took place after September 1975. From October to 25 November, communist demonstrations were based on more specific issues, during which time they strongly criticised the government. This change was influenced by alterations in the MFA's leading faction in the wake of the September 1975 MFA assembly in Tancos Assembly, at which the *gonçalvistas* were the minority.

It is important to note that the number of demonstrations taking place during November were clearly fewer than during the months previous. This seems to be in contrast with the communist's insurrectional theory, according to which the PCP was ready to seize power by force. Despite some temporary collaboration between the most radical groups within the PCP and some extreme-left forces, empirical data suggests that, until 25 November, communist mobilisation was based on its own strength and was limited to its strongholds. Moreover, there is hardly any sign of a

12. The SUV was a paramilitary organisation formed in the wake of the crisis of the fifth provisional government. It included both progressive and radical officers. The PCP, according to some, unsuccessfully attempted to form an autonomous paramilitary structure. See Sánchez Cervelló (1993: 249).



Sources: *Avante!* (1975), *O Militante* (1975–6).

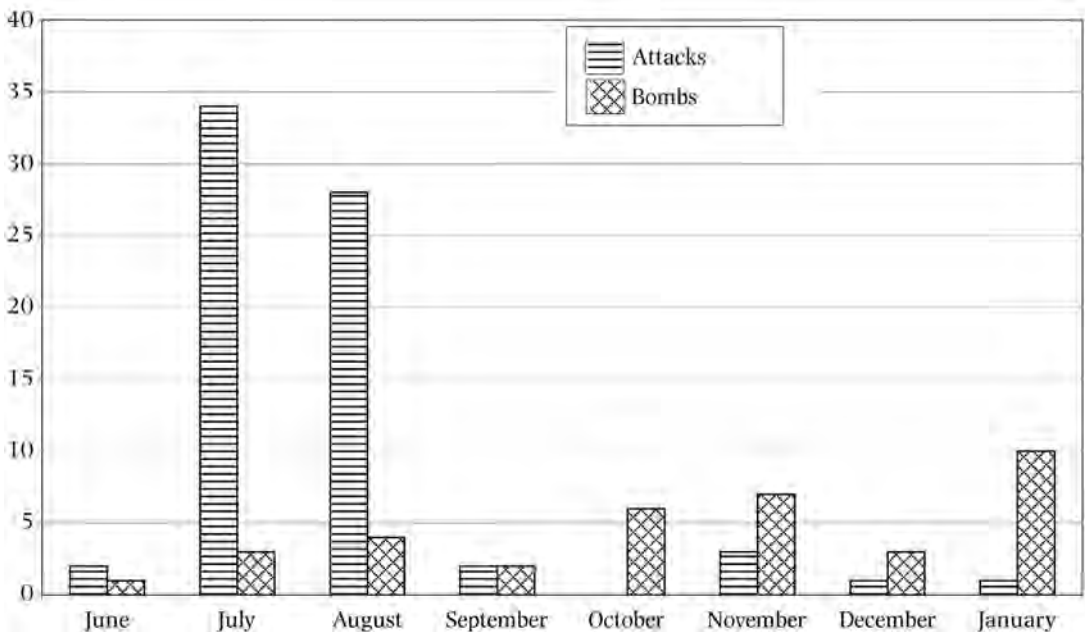
Figure 2: PCP demonstrations during the 'hot summer' of 1975.

13. This coalition was promoted by some military elements identified with Gonçalves, who sought to form an alliance of extreme left-wing groups, the PCP and the MDP. This coalition was intended to ensure the survival of Gonçalves's government and limit the rise of the moderate coalition within the MFA.

communist insurrection strategy to be found amongst the party elite. It is probable that the communist leadership tried to protect the radical policies that had been implemented by Gonçalves, while any further gains were subordinated to the internal distribution of power within the MFA. This strategy was also reflected in the party's attitude towards SUV: although this could have been an instrument to influence the military factions, it was not supported by the PCP as the main instrument to retain power at any cost and expand the revolutionary programme.

During this period many observers and political leaders interpreted the PCP's strategy as a hegemonic attempt to install a communist regime. This resulted in a strong reaction from moderate forces – from both the parties and their military counterparts – and from the Catholic Church. However, the alliance between the communists and extreme-left forces was at least problematic, if not one of conflict – as in the case of the United Revolutionary Front (FUR – Frente de Unidade Revolucionária), a coalition of left-wing parties.<sup>13</sup> The exception was the MDP, which remained the PCP's main ally during the entire period. However, the limits of communist and left-wing mobilisation become apparent when observing its geographical distribution: demonstrations only took place in those areas where the communists were already strong, such as in the Lisbon area.

The last point worth stressing is the extensive violence that took place during the 'hot summer' of 1975, which continued until January 1976. Data on activities against both PCP members and party premises show that, until September 1975, the main types of mobilisation were attacks against local party structures, while in the months that followed bombs were the main instrument used against communist targets (Figure 3). These



Source: *Avante!* (1975), author's calculations.

Figure 3: Bombings and attacks against the PCP (June 1975–January 1976).

actions effectively suspended party activity in the most affected districts – Bragança, Viana do Castelo, Vila Real and Viseu. During this period the PCP decided not to hold demonstrations, and mobilisation was based essentially on local meetings.

## Conclusions

The PCP pursued a revolutionary strategy that relied on military support only at the beginning of the democratisation process – when there was still much uncertainty over the military elite's aims. It then undertook a strategy of autonomous mobilisation that was designed to consolidate its organisational structure. This suggests the communists' organisational strategy depended to a large extent on the internal distribution of power within the MFA, and that the process of party building gave precedence to the party's institutional image over its membership.

This paper highlights two points. The first is that the PCP's strategy for power was based on the alliance with the MFA rather than on its organisational strength. The second is that, despite the PCP's potential for political mobilisation, its organisational structure was essentially devoted to influencing the distribution of power within the military elite and strengthening the relationship with the MFA radicals. This means that the incorporation of members was only a secondary aim for the PCP, which regarded it as an instrument for strengthening its revolutionary legitimacy.

These considerations are confirmed when we look at the strategy followed by the PCP during the different phases of democratisation. In the first period, which lasted until September 1974, the communist elite attempted to consolidate the party organisation, and was supported by the MDP in its territorial penetration – especially in the more conservative areas of the country. Despite this independent effort, the PCP increasingly betrayed its dependence on external constraints, such as the distribution of power within the MFA. Thus, the rise of the faction led by Vasco Gonçalves contributed to the qualitative change in the party's mobilisation through the preference being given to local meetings and rallies. After the institutionalisation of the MFA in March 1975, the uncertainties that characterised the ensuing period and the results of the first democratic elections restricted the PCP to actions designed to enhance revolutionary legitimacy vis-à-vis the democratic legitimacy that was being promoted by the two moderate parties. Thus, during this period the communists used their organisational structure and mobilisation capacity to change the distribution of power within the military elite and to guarantee the PCP's integration into the institutional setting.

The competition between the main parties took place only at the institutional level, and this was reflected in the lack of solid organisational roots established by the two major parties – the PS and the PSD. The Portuguese case highlights that, contrary to what the theory on party development suggests, party competition has a limited impact on organisational features, and that in new democracies the mass party encapsulation is not a necessary condition for the installation and consolidation of a democratic regime. This is not to say that the PCP has not achieved a strong organisational structure compared to the other parties; however, it is important to emphasise that the dynamics of communist mobilisation stressed institutional

integration in order to strengthen its alliance with the military elite, and that the pursuit of social power was a secondary aim. Despite efforts to enhance social mobilisation, the change in the distribution of power within the MFA that occurred in the autumn of 1975 marginalised the PCP at the institutional level and determined its setback in civil society.

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