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Opposition to the Colonial Wars – the Vigil at Capela do Rato

The 50th anniversary of the Vigil at Capela do Rato, in central Lisbon, occurred on December 30, 2022.



President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Vigil in December 2022

The Vigil was one of many instances of opposition to Salazar's Estado Novo, and it was important in demonstrating that ordinary people were beginning publicly to oppose the regime's Colonial War policy, particularly following the death of Salazar himself two years before.

Those attending the Vigil were relatively few, and their ultimate success may be attributed in part to public disapproval of the overreaction by the police and the government.

Although the main element in the eventual fall of the regime was the disaffection of the Armed Forces, opposition by the Catholic Church and ordinary lay Catholic churchgoers also played an important part in the success of the Carnation Revolution.

The beginning of the Colonial Wars

The armed opposition to Portuguese rule over their African colonies began in 1961. Nowadays, it seems far-fetched that a small country such as Portugal should seek to govern no less than five African colonies: the two enormous territories in Southern Africa, Angola and Mozambique; the smaller Guinea-Bissau in West Africa; the archipelago of Cape Verde; and the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. Portugal's attempt to defeat the armed liberation groups took its toll in both money and in lives.

The long-lasting Colonial Wars became so unpopular that many families helped their young men to avoid conscription by escaping over the border into Spain. Young officers in the forces also became disillusioned with the system of recruitment of militia officers, which appeared to devalue their experience and their careers.

The Catholic Church

From the late 1950s, opposition to government policy became evident in the Catholic church. At first, the Bishop of Porto was exiled for his letter of opposition, but from the late 1960s, its lay members also started to express their disapproval.

As we remember that the Armed Forces and the Catholic Church provided two of the principal supports for the Estado Novo, it becomes plain that the dictatorship faced an existential threat.



Exterior of the Capela do Rato, Lisbon – Photo GualdimG Wikipedia

Saturday at Capela do Rato

That threat manifested itself on December 30, 1972 at Capela do Rato, in central Lisbon. Built in 1839 as a private chapel for the Marquis of Praia, it was by 1972 a chapel of the Portuguese church.

Immediately after the celebration of Mass, at about 7.30 in the early evening of Saturday, December 30, 1972, Maria da Conceição Moita approached the microphone near the high altar. Maria was one of a number of Catholics who supported the Boletim Anti-Colonial, a periodic bulletin which criticised Portuguese colonial policy.

Over the sound system, Maria da Conceição announced that she was there in the name of a group of Christians, their aim was first to break the general silence about the Colonial Wars in Angola, Mozambique

and Guinea-Bissau, and to look for peace; and second, to declare solidarity and support for the victims of the wars.

She read a declaration which proclaimed the Vigil in the chapel and a 48-hour fast as a form of protest against the Colonial Wars. She called on all Christians and non-Christians to join this initiative. In the chapel, some hundreds of people considered the issues, while about 20 prepared to begin their fast.

Father João Seabra Diniz, who had just finished celebrating the Mass, expressed surprise at the announcement, and declared that he left any decision to participate to the conscience of each individual. The priest in charge of the chapel, Father Alberto Neto, later said that he was unaware of this development but did not oppose it.

Sunday, December 31

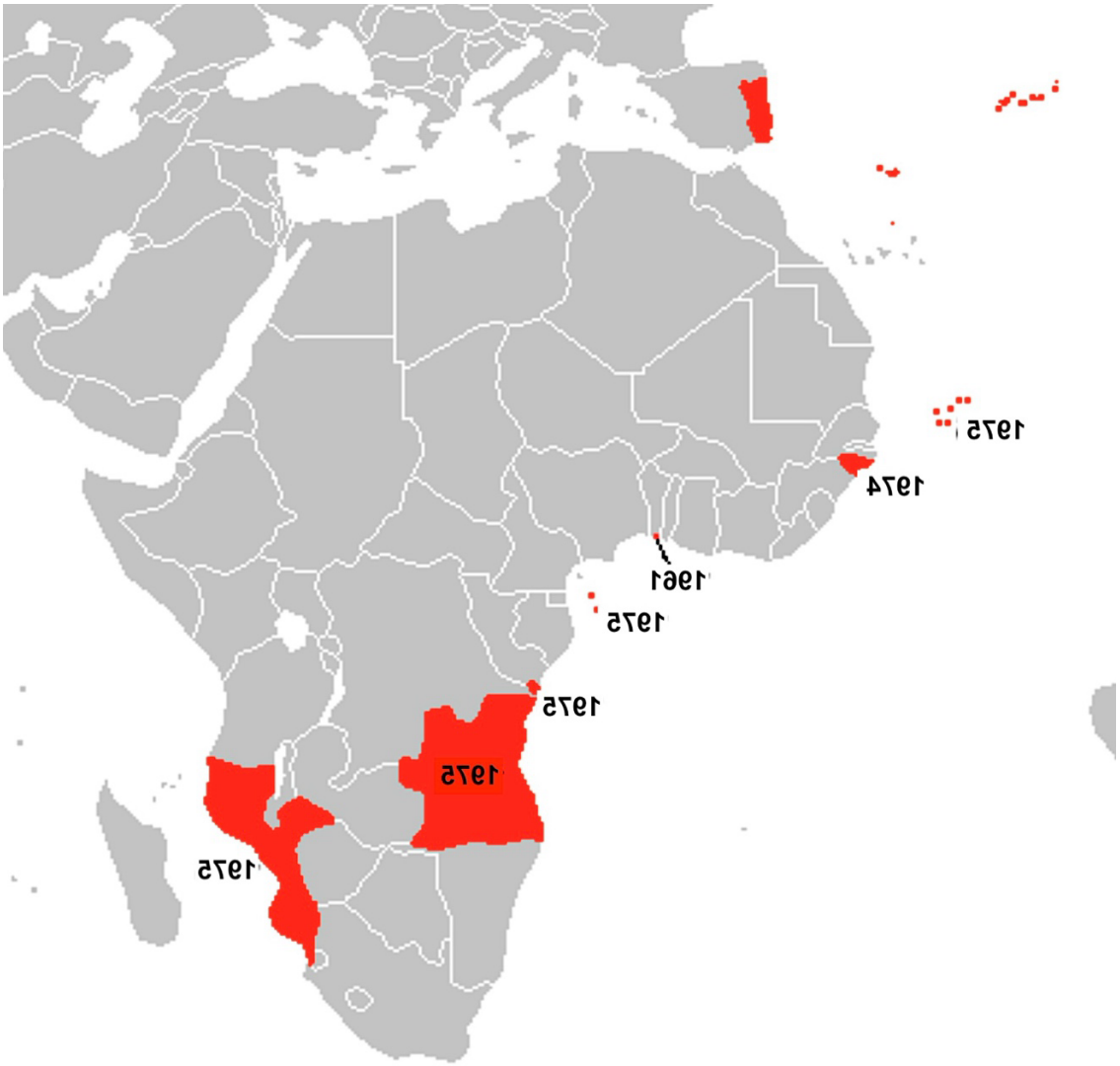
On the following day, Fathers Armindo Garcia and António Janela celebrated the two usual Sunday Masses at 11am and 12.30pm. They declared, “Whatever our position in relation to this gesture, it raises a question of such weight that we cannot ignore it.” On that Sunday, in other churches in Lisbon, flysheets appeared urging more people to join the voluntary fast.

The Motion of the Vigil

On that Sunday afternoon in the chapel, around 300 people approved the following motion:

1. we vigorously repudiate the policies of the Portuguese government in continuing a criminal war, in which they are trying to annihilate the liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies, and in which thousands of young Portuguese are being wounded and incapacitated;
2. we also challenge the attitude and complicity of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Portugal with regard to this war and the problems it creates for Portuguese people;
3. we reject all the repression to which many workers and young people have been subjected for showing their opposition to this criminal war, as well as the outlawing of democratic organisations;
4. we declare our solidarity with the peoples of the colonies in their struggle for freedom;
5. we support all those Portuguese who are fighting for the installation of a just and fair society;
6. we call loudly to all those people who have a conscience to unite in a struggle against the exploitation and oppression of the working people.

This manifesto could not have made clearer its challenge to the authoritarian Estado Novo, and the wars which the state had initiated with no mandate from the people of Portugal. A message from a group of Catholics of Porto arrived that afternoon, showing solidarity with the aims of the Vigil.



Portugal's African Empire

The government strikes back

At around 7pm that evening, police began to arrive outside the chapel and by 8.30pm, it was surrounded by 10 bus-loads riot police, with police dogs, as well as by police from other formations. Traffic was diverted and the police closed access to the area.

At 8.45pm, agents of the Polícia da Segurança Pública entered the chapel and gave warning for everyone to disperse within 10 minutes. Some disobeyed this order and began to chant in unison, "Pardon them, Lord, for they do not know what they do."

After the 10 minutes had elapsed, PSP agents again ordered those in the chapel to leave. The demonstrators responded by asking whether the police had authorisation from the Lisbon Patriarchate to enter the chapel.

About 60 of those who remained in the chapel were taken off to the PSP station in Largo do Rato. The police imprisoned those suspected of being the leaders of this demonstration in the notorious political prison of Caxias on the outskirts of Lisbon, where they were held incommunicado, some of them for two weeks.

When Father António Janela arrived at the chapel at 10pm in order to celebrate midnight Mass, he was informed by the verger that the police had closed the chapel. He went to the PSP station, where he was told officially that the chapel would remain closed. Returning, he found a number of people who desired to attend the midnight Mass.

As the Cardinal Patriarch had not ordered the closure of the chapel, Father Janela celebrated the Mass while some of the congregation leant against the door, effectively barring it from the inside.

When the Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon, D António Ribeiro, learned of the events at the chapel, he decided that usual religious services should go ahead as planned. He then found that Fathers Janela and Garcia had been taken off for interrogation to the headquarters of the Direcção-Geral de Segurança, the secret police, and he, therefore, hurried to the headquarters where the priests were being questioned to demand their release. He refused to leave while they were held, and they were both released within the hour.

The bombs of January 30

While the protest at Capela do Rato took place without physical injury, events elsewhere had unfortunate consequences. On the Saturday evening, small explosions took place in Lisbon and its suburbs.

The bombs had been placed by members of the marxist Brigadas Revolucionárias, and the explosions dispersed flysheets which called for support and solidarity with those undertaking the Vigil in the chapel.

These flysheets also denounced the Colonial Wars as both the cause of misery to the people of Portugal, and an instrument of domination by the Portuguese state.

An unfortunate incident detracted from the cause. Two children of an illiterate charwoman and a gardener for the Lisbon Câmara found one of the dozen unexploded flysheet bombs. As nine-year-old Jaime Armando and his sister, seven-year-old Ana Paula, played with the strange device, it exploded. He lost the fingers of one hand, and she lost the sight of one eye. The connexion between those who organised the Vigil and members of the Brigadas Revolucionárias has never been conclusively proved. Responsibility for this outrage remains unclaimed.



President of the Council Caetano broadcasts

The aftermath

Duplicated copies of the declaration and reports of the events at the chapel soon appeared and circulated widely. Supporters of imprisoned individuals sent messages of protest to both the Prime Minister (Marcelo Caetano) and to the Cardinal Patriarch.

Twelve of those imprisoned were government employees and soon found themselves dismissed from their jobs, leading to protests against economic repression. Supporters of the Vigjl initiated collections to pay the fines imposed on those in prison and the salaries of those dismissed from their jobs.

They also made efforts to find alternative work for those dismissed. Such was the level of public support that, by March 1973, 10 of the 12 had found alternative employment.

Repression continued and, by May 1973, 200 people remained imprisoned as a result of this protest. Analysing the event in a church publication, the Cardinal Patriarch stated that he had not authorised the Vigil, but for the first time he now condemned the repressive action of the Estado Novo.

The effect on the Government

The repercussions following the Vigil obliged the President of the Council, Marcelo Caetano, to intervene. Most unusually, he broadcast on radio and television a 37-minute defence of the actions of the police.

In the Chamber of Deputies, Miller Guerra famously denounced government policy in Africa before both he and Francisco Sá Carneiro resigned their positions as members of the Assembleia Nacional.

For those who had continued to believe that the regime could be transformed from dictatorship to democracy through internal pressure, these events provided the *coup de grâce*.

The fact that ordinary people, some of them government employees, had chosen to make a public demonstration of their opposition to government policy in the Colonial Wars marked a new development in Portuguese public life.

More than that, the vigorous response by both the police and the political police aroused outrage in the country in general, and provoked the resignation of two Members of the Portuguese Parliament and a letter of protest by the Cardinal Patriarch.

These events showed that opposition to government policy was coming closer to the surface, that the church hierarchy was changing its position and that ordinary people were prepared to risk their livelihoods and even their lives in the struggle to end the dictatorship, an objective that the people of Portugal at last achieved through the Carnation Revolution of April 25,1974, some 16 months later.



Poster of dismissal of public sector employees

The motion at Capela do Rato expressed the views of a growing number of Portuguese, and people now remember with pride and gratitude those few people who dared to challenge the government.

The President of the Republic himself addressed an audience in the Capela do Rato on the 50th anniversary of the Vigil to pay homage to a group of brave citizens in the people's struggle against the dictatorship.

Read more from **Peter Booker** about the **Three Remarkable Escapes from Salazar's Prisons** or **Portugal's Colonial War in Guiné – the beginning of the end**.

Peter Booker

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www.algarvehistoryassociation.com