

'Crossing the Rubicon' from Le Monde (26 April 1974)

Caption: On 26 April 1974, the French daily newspaper Le Monde considers the consequences of the military insurrection and of the 'Carnation Revolution' in Portugal and analyses the ambitions of the new military regime.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. FAUVET, Jacques. 26.04.1974, n° 9 107; 31e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Le Rubicon", p. 1.

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Crossing the Rubicon

One month after a practice run which itself proved very worrying for Marcello Caetano's regime, the Portuguese army seemed very close, on Thursday 25 April, to succeeding in taking power. At all events, the discontent expressed in some strongly worded pamphlets by the 'young captains' claiming to share the views of the Chief of the General Staff and his deputy proved powerful enough to persuade a sufficient number of units in the three armed forces to cross the Rubicon. It seems that General Francisco da Costa Gomes and General António Spínola, stripped of their commands a month ago, form part of the junta which, late Thursday morning, was claiming to have forced the government to stand down.

Even if, by some sleight of hand, the defeated regime managed to save face, the Movement of the Armed Forces has already secured the success of its main demands. In denouncing the 'regime', in speaking of returning power to the people through general elections, it has chosen to lean for support, in its struggle against the extremists, on the aspirations of a population locked for more than half a century into a dictatorship whose grip a series of artificial 'consultations' was never able to loosen. And General Spínola's thesis that the war overseas cannot be won by military means cannot but influence the policies of the authorities.

Soldiers exasperated with the blindness of the extremists have not, of course, turned overnight into the artisans of a return to democracy. All the same, the new team will find it difficult to maintain the niggling censorship and the merciless political police that characterised the Portuguese regime. Similarly, they will be unable, while refusing to dispose of the empire 'at knockdown prices', to keep to the sort of vague 'federalism' advocated by General Spínola for the overseas possessions in the book which sparked off the explosive chain of events.

The impact of the military coup will be felt most strongly in Africa, which has become an intolerable burden for a nation of modest size, possessing only modest resources. In Mozambique, where the situation is continuing to deteriorate, in Guinea-Bissau and, to a lesser extent, in Angola, the possibility can no longer be ruled out entirely of an eventual negotiation with 'rebels' whose representative status and even, at times, whose existence Lisbon has never ceased to deny. The Portuguese bastions of 'White Africa' can begin to glimpse, albeit at an undefined point in the future, the prospect of autonomy or even of independence, a development which would place the Rhodesian and South African regimes in a difficult situation, one they have long feared.

Of all the countries of Europe, it is, of course, on Spain that a more 'liberal' regime in Lisbon would have the greatest impact. The 'bad example' offered by an army from the Iberian peninsula could exert a powerful influence when the question of Franco's succession is posed in earnest. Too many illusions should not, however, be harboured as to the 'democratic' aspirations of the Spanish military, even if they have kept their distance from the present government, nor as to the prospects for a regime which, as it is not burdened with a ruinously expensive war, has an immeasurably greater chance of survival than its Portuguese counterpart.

Once again, then, the centurions have taken up arms, in the midst of a grave national crisis, to take over from politicians overwhelmed by events or powerless to act. This time, however, and the paradox is worth noting, it is not the 'leftist peril' which has drawn the army out of its barracks, as was the case in Greece and in Chile. The armed forces, coddled and egged on by a government which is driving the nation to ruin so that they may wage war in the African 'provinces', have themselves come to realise the foolishness of their task. Having proved clear-sighted on this point at least, they may ultimately, through their opposition to the extremists committed to colonial war, find themselves putting forward some of the remedies that might put an end to the political backwardness, the economic bankruptcy and the moral dilemma of a regime designed to ignore the people.