

Social trends: Aversion to social unrest is a double-edged sword [Print](#)

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In May, tens of thousands attended open-air masses in Lisbon, Porto and Fátima when Pope Benedict XVI made a four-day visit to Portugal, a country in which more than 80 per cent of people identify themselves as Catholics.

In June, thousands of mourners lined the streets of Lisbon to pay their last respects to José Saramago, the Nobel prize-winning novelist, who months before his death at the age of 87 described the Bible as “a catalogue of cruelties and of the worst of human nature”.

Between these two events, Teresa Pires and Helena Paixão, divorced mothers in their 30s, married at a Lisbon registry office, becoming the first couple to take advantage of a new law making Portugal the sixth country in Europe to legalise same-sex marriages.

The crowds which held up books by the Communist writer during two days of national mourning when his body lay in Lisbon's city hall almost certainly included people who had prayed with the Pontiff at Praça do Comércio, a nearby riverfront square, or at Fátima, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared in 1917.

Overlapping allegiances like this are not uncommon in Portugal, which describes itself as a country of *brandos costumes*, or mild ways, a vexed phrase that alludes partly to an understanding tolerance and partly to the kind of acquiescence that saw the country endure 41 years of repressive rule under the Salazar-Caetano regime.

Portugal's aversion to polarisation is a double-edged sword. Social unrest of the kind that has swept Greece is not a pressing concern in a country where strikes and protests are relatively infrequent and low-key. According to the interior ministry, Portugal also has the lowest crime rate among the 15 pre-expansion members of the European Union – at 38 crimes a year per 1,000 inhabitants compared with an average for those countries of 69.

Conversely, a tendency to back away from radical solutions can leave problems only partly resolved. “Portugal has performed well in the past in bringing excessive budget deficits under control,” says a London-based analyst with a credit rating agency. “But it has never gone the full distance and sought to achieve a zero deficit.”

Many employers would argue that a conciliatory approach has prevented governments from liberalising excessively rigid labour legislation, in spite of reforms in 2008 that made the labour market more flexible. Public sector employees are virtually guaranteed a job for life, regardless of performance, making it harder for young people to find employment or gain promotion.

Brandos Costumes was used as the title for a 1975 film in which the female characters live trapped in a decaying mansion under the sway of a dictatorial father figure. Directed by Alberto Seixas Santos, the film is admired as a classic depiction of the stifling atmosphere of Portuguese society during the Salazar-Caetano regime and the colonial wars in Africa.

While *brandos costumes* remain a distinctive trait, the country has changed radically from the pre-1974 order, when women were barred from becoming judges or diplomats and a licence was required to own a cigarette lighter. More women now graduate from university than men and a majority of new judges are female.

The country is one of a small number that grant paternity leave. José Sócrates, the prime minister, described the legalisation of same-sex marriages in January as “an historic victory for Portugal in the struggle against discrimination and injustice”.

In contrast with Spain, where hundreds of thousands protested in the streets before gay marriage was legalised in 2005, opposition in Portugal was relatively muted, although opinion polls show that only about 30 per cent of people support same-sex marriage.

In 2007, Portugal legalised abortion on request during the first 10 weeks of pregnancy. Although 84.5 per cent of Portuguese describe themselves as Catholics, only 18.7 per cent say they practise the religion and only 10.3 per cent are regular churchgoers.

One of the apparent paradoxes of *brandos costumes* is that tolerance itself can lead to what many would see as radical solutions. This certainly applies to drugs. In 2001, the government decriminalised the personal use and possession of all drugs, including heroin and cocaine, in a measure that some British newspapers said would set “alarm bells ringing across Europe”.

However, in 2008, the Cato Institute, a US think-tank, concluded that “decriminalisation has had no adverse effect

on drug usage rates in Portugal", which "in numerous categories are now among the lowest in the EU". It added that several drug-related problems, including sexually transmitted diseases and deaths from overdoses, had "decreased dramatically".

Officials point out that drug use remains illegal in Portugal and anyone in possession can have the drugs confiscated and be sent before drug commissions, which can include psychiatrists and social workers, and seek to encourage addicts into treatment and prevent recreational users from falling into addiction.

After the revolution, *fado*, Lisbon's raw traditional music, was seen as backward-looking and fell out of favour before enjoying a renaissance that is now in full flower.

After the death of Amália Rodrigues, the great *fado* diva, in 1999, José Saramago revealed that the star fêted by the Salazar regime had made secret donations to the Communist party. "Life is always more complex than it appears," he said.

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