

POLITICAL MESSIANISM IN PORTUGAL, THE CASE OF ANDRÉ VENTURA¹

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Abstract

The article aims to discuss Populist Radical Right ("PRR") through the case of the Portuguese party, Chega ("enough"), presenting its leader, André Ventura, as a political Messiah. Confronting the literature, this article emphasises that, until Ventura came into the scene and contrary to the idea of Portuguese exceptionalism, populism was historically evident in Portuguese politics long before the advent of Chega. Although much has been written about the PRR party, this article presents its leader, André Ventura, in the frame of political messianism. Supporting the argument with tweets from Ventura, this article shows that the leader of Chega navigates the waters of Portuguese colonial memory, with its narrative of a country without racism and of political messianism with roots in Sebastianism in case of Portugal, a poetic-prophetic aspiration for the return of the political saviour. To acquire a religious aura, Ventura uses elements of popular Portuguese religiosity, such as the Miracle of Fatima.

Keywords: André Ventura, Chega, Messianism, Populism.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on Populist Radical Right (PRR) became central to political science in the last decade, with the emergence of such political movements, actors and parties and their electoral success. Notwithstanding a left populism (v.g., Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, 2014; Otjes, Louwerse, 2015; Kioupiolis, 2016), the PRR came to be the most evident form of populism by its social and political disruption, mediatisation and electoral success. As Fukuyama (2018) argues, a hypothesis could be that what is called new politics, i.e. polarisation of the left/right based on post-material issues reinforces radical right parties/movements. Perspectives on abortion,

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sexual orientation, gender identities, racial minorities' rights and affirmative actions, immigration and refugees, and national values are the basis of the so-called "culture wars" (Hunter, 1991, 1993, 1996; Wuthnow, 1996; Ferreira Dias, 2022). In opposition to worldviews - a *globalist left* and a *nativist right* (Ferreira Dias, 2022) - they need each to exist in a process the anthropology calls "contrasting identities".

The text intends to answer the following question: does Chega and its leader also incorporate a long Portuguese tradition of political messianism, as it has integrated "identitarians" (the formulation of a Populist party of the Radical Right based on Zúquete's (2018) central work)? Considering this, the specialised literature will be evaluated. Next section of the text is devoted to a search of André Ventura's tweets to assess the existence of an intentional intersection between popular religious imagery (i.e. the long-term existence of a messianic background and the Portuguese Marian devotion) and his political mission.

From the methodological point of view, the research follows a qualitative option. This is justified by the relevance of the religious reference itself, in its messianic purposes analysed below. The selection of André Ventura's Twitter account responds to the fact that (i) this social network is the one favoured by the leader of 'Chega', (ii) the content of Facebook is only a republication of Twitter, and (iii) the search for posts, being more accessible, has more reliability.

A preliminary search containing diverse terms such as "God", "religion", "faith", and "Fatima", allowed the identification of two keywords in the relationship between religion and political mission: "God" and "Fatima". The posts identified in this work had media repercussions, fulfilling André Ventura's goal.

Thus, the present study retakes and expands our previous argument (2021), that Ventura (and his party, Chega), however a typical case of PRR, should also be inscribed in a long-term tradition of political messianism. This perspective considers this political actor more than the party and provides a complimentary analysis of populism. Secondly, considering the most recent work of Zúquete (2022), it is argued that contrary to what is maintained by the literature (v.g. Carreira da Silva, Salgado, 2018; Santana-Pereira, Cancela, 2020; Valle, 2020) and common opinion, the "Chega" party did not inaugurate populism in Portugal but is a part of another long populist tradition tracked back to the beginning of the 20th century.

The following section of the article will systematise the concepts of populism and messianism, providing an explanatory theoretical framework

for this study. Next, the idea of political messianism is approached to explain the theoretical framework that underpins analysis of André Ventura. Subsequently, a systematic literature review of the Chega party is presented, from its emergence until the present day, framing it in Portuguese political life. Finally, the case of André Ventura as a political messiah is introduced based on material collected from his Twitter account.

1 POPULISM AND THE POLITICAL MESSIAH

For this article it is essential to delimit two main concepts: populism and messianism. State of the art concerning populism is now more complex than ever since it became a highly stressed topic in political and social sciences. As highlighted below while discussing the myth of Portugal as a free-populism country, “the people” came to be the primary category both in western democratic processes as the source of political authority and in populist narratives as a whole, a single entity. The combination of these ideas produces the category of “sovereign people”. This conceptualisation led to the perpetuation of the concept of the people as the owner and source of legitimation of political power. This is a well-known concept in constitutional studies.

Concerning the idea of populism, the most consensual aspect is the difficulty of finding a consensus, i.e. that the term presents a slippery conceptual dimension, varying widely in the meanings it acquires (Taggart, 2000), due to the discursive modalities which the concept allows to be invoked, considering geographical and cultural variations (Freedon, 2017).

Theoretical studies on populism received the first significant contribution from Margaret Canovan’s (1981) book, which offered a seven-fold typology of populism: farmers’ populism, peasants’ populism, intellectuals’ populism, populist dictatorship, populist democracy, reactionary populism, and politicians’ populism. Taggart’s (2000) work became the most significant after Canovan’s. Here Taggart argued that populism is a response to (what is seen as) decadent representative politics. The growth of studies on populism followed as it arose in two regions in the 1990s: South America – with neoliberal projects of Menem in Argentina (1989–1999), Collor de Mello in Brazil (1990-1992), Fujimori in Peru (1990–2000), and Europe, *prima facie* with The French National Front (Kaltwasser et. al., 2017, p. 23-24).

The growth of populism in Europe is mainly linked to emergence of the so-called *Identitarians*. As Zúquete (2018) refers, the new right (*Nouvelle Droite*) comes to light in the 1960s as the counterpart of western liberal

capitalism, having Alain de Benoist as the most prominent figure. Guillaume Faye's book *Pourquoi nous combattons. Manifeste de la Résistance européenne* (2001), came to be the kickoff of the movement and its internationalization. The heartland of *Identitarians* is the defence of European native identities in the face of globalisation and the fear of the *great replacement*.

As said, The French National Front opened the road for populist parties in Europe (Art, 2011; Norris, 2005; Mudde, 2007, 2013; cited in Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Post-material struggles became the land of dispute in western societies. Culture wars on race, gender, abortion rights, affirmative actions, religious values, cultural monism *versus* multiculturalism, belonging to the nation, and other identity politics (v.g. Fukuyama, 2018; Kaltwasser et al., 2017) pose severe challenges for social consensus and contractualism.

Much can be said on definition of populism since it also includes left-wing parties (v.g. Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, 2014; Otjes, Louwerse, 2015; Kioupiolis, 2016). According to Mudde (2004, p. 543) – and as consensually accepted – populism is an ideology that considers society to be divided into two antagonistic and homogeneous groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”. It sustains its message in the idea on the *volonté générale* [general will] of the people. As Mudde (2017, p. 48) states, this definition of populism includes four “core concepts”: ideology, the people, the elite, and general will.

Hallin (2019), following Laclau's work, states that populism is a way of doing politics, not an ideology. On the contrary, it holds different ideologies, from the left-wing to the right-wing, as a model of doing politics. Somehow, this theoretical framework is related to Ostiguy's (2017) argument that populism is in many ways a spectacle, a show, a performance.

The long-term presence of populism(s) in western societies led Mudde to classify populism as a ‘pathological normalcy’ (Mudde, 2010). In a diverse sense, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) claim that the role of obstructing the demagogue politicians lies in political parties rather than in a society since the political party is also responsible for building “factual” alliances with outsiders who reveal traces of authoritarianism. For this purpose, they show four standard behaviours that indicate the presence of an authoritarian-type political discourse/actor: 1) rejecting the rules of the democratic game through words and actions; 2) denying the legitimacy of their opponents; 3) tolerating or encouraging violence; 4) willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, as well as those of the press. For the authors, it is the “outsider populist” who gathers these four indicators the best since such populist comes from outside the political arena and claims to

represent the voice of the people against a corrupt and conspiratorial elite (i.e. what they claim to be) acting against the interests of the people. From an extensive perspective, Stanley (2018) sees populist behaviour – especially considering Trump’s campaign – as a signal of fascism. This is because the author interpreted *fascism* both as an ideology based on a division of society between the “good people” and the “corrupt elite” and a way of doing politics, plastic enough to be actualised from 20th-century patterns. However, this interpretation hardly differs from consensual definitions of populism.

For Canovan (1981, 1999), the authoritarian populist is a charismatic leader who seeks to distance himself from other politicians and intellectual elites – the so-called anti-elitism (Taggart, 2000) – to appeal to the reactionary feelings of the population, propagating, especially, the idea that he speaks in their name (often referred as “the people”; Taggart, 2000) against the system. A social dichotomy thus emerges a struggle not of classes but between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004). However, a charismatic leader does not have to be necessarily authoritarian. Considering the Brazilian case, while that is very clear for Bolsonaro (v.g. Costa, Da Silveira, 2018; Da Silva, Rodrigues, 2021), it is not in the cases of Collor de Mello and Lula da Silva (v.g. Marques, Mendes, 2006; Sallum Jr., 2008). Portuguese examples of non-authoritarian populisms are discussed further.

Studying populism or merely paying attention to their narratives, one notices that the “people” category is extensively used, like a mantra. “People will”, “the good people”, “the pure people”, and “in the name of the people” are expressions that address populists’ speeches to the same idea: being legitimately there for the people. People are not seen as a complex, diverse category but as a homogeneous political one, as opposed to a simplified homogeneous “elite”. As De Cleen et al. (2020, p. 156), people are discursively constructed in opposition to an illegitimate “elite” that is said not to represent and not to consider the interests of ordinary people. This is a way to declassify politicians, journalists, academics, and intellectuals in general, to present themselves as outsiders who came to give voice to the voiceless, those left behind by globalisation. This perspective is responsible for a vertical spatial orientation of the society as down/up, related to power and status (De Cleen et al., 2020). More than classist, this is a medieval logic of struggle of the commoner against the elite/regime. To operate with this mass of commons, it is necessary to produce what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) call a “chain of equivalence” since those commons share little things in common, except anxiety and frustration *vis-à-vis* the elite.

Additionally, this opposition is not exclusive. The frustration of these *commons* of being left behind by the elites finds in “the other”, the immigrant, the closest and daily target. The Muslim immigrant or refugee came to be the metaphor for all white working-class male frustrations. This anxiety was canalised, for instance, in Trump’s election and Brexit campaigning (Mondon, Winter, 2018). Thus, the construction of the people goes side by side with the idea of the “nation” via an exclusionary ethnocultural nationalism/nativism (Mudde 2007; Rydgren, 2005, 2007, 2017).

The exiguous space does not allow an extensive review of literature on populism. For what matters for this article, it is sufficient to recognise the nodal point of category “the people” on which the populist narrative of opposition is constructed. First against the elite/regime, then in the face of “the other”, the immigrant, mainly the Muslim and its threat to European identity. These “people” present a positive character, especially considering the “other”, a Muslim man that takes the jobs and wives (Mondon, Winter, 2018), and the “corrupt elite”. Serves as an example of this type of otherness, André Ventura’s words concerning the Ukrainian refugees compared to Muslims: “they don’t come with an iPhone” (Gomes, 2022).

As far as messianism is concerned, its religious substratum comes *de facie*. Without the figure of the Messiah-warrior (David) or the Messiah-redeemer (Jesus), it would be impossible to arrive at the Messiah-politician. Therefore, messianism corresponds to a belief or expectation of faith in the arrival or return of a charismatic leader who will lead leader’s people - as the “chosen people” - to a kingdom of peace and justice (Negrão, 2001). Portuguese and Brazilian cultures are impregnated by this imaginary, significantly by Sebastianism (Hermann, 1998, 2005; Lima, 2010; dos Santos, 2012; de Souza Andrade, 2015; de Azambuja Ribeiro, 2015) and, in the Portuguese case, by the strategically and ideologically use during the Estado Novo (Martins, 1992).

In the context of this article, it is relevant to address some notes on Sebastianism to highlight the argument below. Sebastianism is understood as an emotional and irrational exaltation of political and religious nature as a consequence of the disappearance of the Portuguese King Sebastian in the Battle of Alcácer-Quibir, Marrocco, in 1578 opening a dynastic crisis of succession. The myth was woven around the idea that King Sebastian would return on his white horse one foggy morning. This myth presents shreds of religious messianism related to the return of Jesus and the redemption of the “pure”, the “chosen ones”.

According to Oliveira Martins (2014, p. 174), Sebastianism was a “posthumous proof of nationality”. For an essayist Eduardo Lourenço (1978), the Sebastian myth constitutes the pinnacle of the unrealistic existence of Portugal, producing a structure of absence of itself. Thus, Sebastianism became a messianic hope for the glory of Portugal. However, in the poetry of Fernando Pessoa, Sebastianism follows the symbolic heroism of The Mists of Avalon, the Arthurian myth. Following thinkers such as Duarte Nunes do Leão and Almeida Garrett, Teixeira de Pascoaes linked Sebastianism to Portuguese nostalgia (*Saudade*), a feeling of absence, loss, hope, myth, faith, presence and dream (see Barros Dias, 2017).

As above, Sebastianism appeared in present Portugal but was an essential tool during Estado Novo, the authoritarian regime from 1933 to 1974, centred on the figure of António Oliveira Salazar, the dictator who established a new regime in Portugal through the Constitution of 1933, reinforcing, successively his powers in an authoritarian dictatorship regime. “Salazarism” was, to a large extent, a charismatic and “Sebastian” leadership. This Sebastian typology of Head of State is found in the presidential election of Aníbal Cavaco Silva (president of the Portuguese Republic from 2006 to 2016) as a phenomenon of belief in a charismatic leader who would redeem his people in economic and social crisis’ periods (Plo, 2006).

Thus, it is understood here that the messiah figure operates decisively in the collective imaginary of the Portuguese society, allowing coeval recycling through charismatic political leadership.

Strictly speaking, the personalist dimension of power comprehends a political invocation of the Judeo-Christian tradition of “Messiah”, holding both a religious and political meaning. In this framework that shaped western cultures, impressively Iberian cultures, “Messiah” would present a masculine outline, warrior or redeemer. With the emergence of authoritarian regimes and claims, the “Messiah” would be attached to the figure of the dictator, although he could also assume a dimension of a “constitutional leadership” (da Cunha, 2015, p. 17). Ferreira da Cunha, cited, recognises a scenario that favours the emergence of this type of figure, taking into account that the Portuguese society presents a significant growth of disbelief in “modern electoral legitimacies (...), and unfortunately seems very open to the possibility of a charismatic leader, Bonapartist or other” (da Cunha, 2015, p. 19). This figure does not have univocal outlines, being re-signified according to local socio-cultural cleavages. Thus, democratic societies allow the weaving of a saviour who appears and presents himself as acting within legality and in defence of the community, never against legal norms,

unless these are against society. The balance of contradictions (*contraditio in terminis*) allows popular legitimisation at every moment because such messiahs speak for diverse publics.

As mentioned above, the ideas of political messiahship and legitimation are in a novel. From Weber's (1922) consideration, three types of legitimation are classified: (i) rational/legal, (ii) traditional, and (iii) charismatic. Charismatic leadership is the one that best fits the context of this article's analysis, i.e., the political messiah.

For this analysis, it is essential to bear in mind that the concept of "charisma" corresponds to a "gift" or to a "grace" revealed and which produces adherence and obedience from the whole or part of the community (Weber, 1922).

Analysing Franco and Pinochet in a framework of political messianism, Lara Martínez (2010) argues that in the impossibility of obtaining legal legitimacy through the democratic process, the supernatural invocation emerges as a legitimation mechanism, producing, therefore, the charismatic legitimation. This is evident in the claim by Pinochet that "the hand of God is here to save us" in the "holy war" against communism as the struggle of "good" against "evil" (Martínez, 2010, p. 150).

Theorising, Martínez (2010) states that a dictatorial regime necessarily deals with the problem of obedience and legitimacy, so the appropriation of religious symbology operates as a social cement. Through a spiritual investiture of messianic nature, the dictator, or the Messiah-politician (in a methodological broader sense), legitimises his actions, acquiring capital of unquestionable legitimacy since God seals it³, in a clear maussian (Mauss, 2007 [1923-4]) perspective on "gift" as a contract.

2 THE FALLACY OF THE COUNTRY WITHOUT POPULISM AND THE ADVENT OF THE CHEGA PARTY

For a long-time, Portugal was considered a country absent of populism and/or PRR (v.g. Carreira da Silva, Salgado, 2018; Santana-Pereira, Cancela, 2020; Valle, 2020). Arguably, this is due to a misunderstood or disregard of long-term historical manifestations of a *soft* populism⁴. In his most recent

³ Several discussions of the "sacred king" offer tools for a broader approach to the figure of the messianic dictator. On this subject, see, for example, Huan (1959), Valensise et al. (1986), and Scubla (2003).

⁴ The idea of "soft" is deeply linked to the Portuguese collective personality – "the people are serene".

work, Zúquete (2022) presents key populist figures in Portuguese political history from the 20th century. In the category of *military populism*, the author mentioned Sidónio Pais (Zúquete, 2022, p. 103-106), President of the Portuguese Republic, from 9th May to 14th of December 1918, when he was murdered. Sidónio's party was based on a logic of national unification of "the good people" – from left to right – against the partisanship of the "old republic". His performance was typically populist, with constant travels around the country, leadership by acclamation and always dressed in a military uniform, often on horseback and with a sword around his waist, at the same time using the populist language of someone who speaks clearly and tells the people "the truth". In the same category, Humberto Delgado (Zúquete, 2022, p. 107-112) is included, a career military officer who ran for the Presidency in 1958, in the middle of the dictatorship. Delgado was a typical example of a "caudillo" (i.e. strong military political leader). In his candidacy, he presented himself as a cross-party candidate, an independent military man, and the candidate of all men of goodwill. Delgado's rhetoric focused on moral superiority over Salazar and the decadent *Estado Novo*, concentrated in a minority that dominated public life and received the benefits of power, giving voice to the majority of humiliated, exploited, and persecuted "slaves". Other examples can be found in Zúquete's (2022) work. After the 1974 revolution, one of the revolutionaries, Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, ran for President in 1976. Otelo was and remained a symbol of socialist populism, for whom representative democracy was perceived as elitist and bourgeois, so he argued for direct democracy with a popular base from factories to neighbourhoods. For him, his candidacy was in the people's name against oppressors, represented by the bosses and the foreign imperialists with representation in Portugal (Zúquete, 2022, p. 125).

In another category, the *redemptory populism*, Zúquete mentioned Sá Carneiro (Zúquete, 2022, p. 127-136), whom Ventura claimed to be his inspiration (Gomes, Coelho, 2021). Sácarneirism, right democratic populism, was a "populism of the base", related to a charismatic leadership linked to the party's bases. His untimely, unexpected and mysterious death, caused by a plane crash, left Sá Carneiro as a mystical, messianic, and inspirational figure for the Portuguese right, of whom several claims to be heirs (Monteiro, 2020). Still, on the right wing, it is relevant to mention the Democratic-Christian party (CDS-PP), double-folded in two periods: first, during Manuel Monteiro's, and second, Paulo Porta's leadership. Taken briefly, Monteiro's period (Zúquete, 2022, p. 159-168) was characterised by an intense populist campaign, highlighted by his focus on "the people" against the political

elite. For him, politics should be an arena of virtue, the reason why he was committed to the moralisation of Portuguese politics, presenting the party as an outsider of the corrupt axis of governance. Attacked by the left to be closest to Le Pen's agenda, Monteiro's CDS proposed the aggravation of sentences and the end of probation in homicide and sexual violence cases. It was also when the issue of welfare dependence (now invoked by Chega) was introduced, inaugurating the *productivist* division of society between those who work and those who live off them. The nationalist vein of Monteiro's CDS was evident in the bill to consecrate the subject of history as essential for passing the school year to convey a patriotic nationalism. However, since Portugal was not experiencing a crisis of immigration and multiculturalism, as a convict democratic-Christian, Monteiro rejected the anti-minority agenda, reinforced by a solid connection to the Roma community, which he supported for years and was the party's guardian of honour in campaigns. During Porta's leadership (Zúquete, 2022, p. 168-180), the narrative of the party outside the system and offering the Portuguese people "enough is enough" was maintained (it is not careless to note the programmatic and linguistic continuities of Chega) against the corruption of the two largest parties in the country, one centre-left (Socialist Party) and one centre-right (Social Democrat Party). Paulo Portas recalls the memory of Sá Carneiro, claiming that the CDS was more "Sácarneirist" than the PSD, Carneiro's party. It is also with Portas who introduced religious performance into politics. By making the cross sign before speaking and invoking the cult of Mary⁵, Portas made the CDS the party of the nativist and securitarian New Right, a situation also evident in its support for security and defence of a more securitarian state.

Linking this context to Chega's emergence, Zúquete asks:

"The calling upon the people as a superior instance, the invocation of a direct and unique connection with the sentiment and judgment of that people described as being composed of ordinary Portuguese, the denunciation of the elites as responsible for the degradation of the country, the desire to moralise the political class and parties, the search for the crowd and the masses as a source of legitimation, productivism (the workers vs the parasites), the preaching posture with a view to the redemption of the system, and finally, the inauguration of a new republic as the final horizon of criticism of the system: what is there in all this that is genuinely new, never before seen, experienced or read in contemporary Portuguese politics?" (Zúquete, 2022, p. 225)

⁵ Mary's cult is nodal in the Portuguese Catholicism and popular religiosity, linked to Fatima's events (see Bennett, 2012).

Some final notes of context to left-wing populism (Zúquete, 2022, p. 180-191) need to be offered here. Created in 1999, the Left Bloc (BE, *Bloco de Esquerda*) introduced New Left in Portugal, affirming itself as the emancipatory left standing against capitalist globalisation. The 2008 sovereign debt crisis accelerated the BE's anti-systemic dynamics, betting on a narrative of creating a great left uniting the dominated (ordinary people) against the dominant (corporate-political ecosystem). A popular front of discontents meant to represent the workers, the young and the old, a despised the majority that needed the voice of a robust majority left. During the troika rescue period, with the governance of a right-wing coalition (PSD, CDS), the radical left party BE imported the narrative of the Spanish Podemos party and Mélenchon's French movement, betting on the division of the country into two: the Portugal of the "below", of the exploited, and the Portugal of the "above", of the political and business elites.

2.1 The case of Chega

Considering the exiguity of space, it is crucial to present the Chega party in a necessary framework of relevant literature.

For purposes of this article, Chega is regarded as a mainstream PRR. Relying on Mudde's (2007) typology, and confirmed by Mendes (2021) showing that Chega presents shreds of evidence of nativism, populism, authoritarianism, and producerism by focusing on the dichotomy between the "good people" that work and pay taxes and the "corrupt elites" that protect those who do not want to work (welfare abusers) and live off the backs of the "good Portuguese". Those welfare abusers or *subsidy dependents* (in a more literal translation) are mostly racialized people⁶, studied in a similar way by Mondon and Winter (2018)⁷. This matches Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2015) argument of xenophobic nationalism as part of populist strategies and narratives (see also Inglehart, Norris, 2017). Since the idea of "nation" is embodied in the patriarchy, those parties are averse to feminism (Mondon and Winter refer to the concept of male anxiety). Chega is no exception (Santos, Roque, 2021).

Despite Mudde's (2010) proposal of "pathological normalcy" to classify PRR parties, as Marchi (2020, p. 214) says, Chega is considered a racist, fascist

⁶ However, this assumption is not so straightforward since part of the Chega electorate is not opposed to the presence of immigrants but rather to the idea of welfare dependency (v.g. Madeira, Silva, Malheiros, 2021).

⁷ For Chega's construction of the 'other', see Jaramillo (2021).

party, dangerous for Portuguese democracy. This is particularly evident in leftist speeches and some media. However, as Mendes and Dennison (2021) mentioned, part of the party's success came from the popular perception of this party as democratic and non-violent. This is a double-folded context, with commonly shared support for democracy and a substantial nostalgia for the authoritarian regime, as noted by Santana (2021).

Thus, its rapid success came in line with a country with intense and long-term racist and law and order beliefs and practices (Santana-Pereira, Cancela, 2020; Mendes, 2021). This can be explained by the fact that Portugal remained a colonial country until the 1970s, being extensively exposed to a nationalist educational system, typical of authoritarian regimes, which intensely conveyed a positive view of Portuguese colonialism as exceptional, friendly and miscegenated.

Chega is commonly considered an André Ventura's 'one-person show' party. Born in a wide-urban and highly populated peripheral Lisbon area (Mem Martins) in 1983, Ventura holds a complex trajectory. With a conservative tendency, aged 17 he joined the Youth of Social-Democratic Party (PSD), a centre-right party, since he considered the Democratic-Christian party (CDS) an elitist bourgeois party. A religious fervour made him join the seminar to become a priest. It is said that an adolescent love made him change his mind. After high school, Ventura joined Nova Law School, finishing his studies with 19 of 20 grades. With a public scholarship, he then joined the University of Cork, Ireland, for a PhD. On his return, he enters a frenetic phase, teaching at Law School, writing novels and opinions on journals, and becoming a TV, football and criminal analyst. Re-joining PSD, Ventura was looking for a political opportunity that came with his run for Mayor in Loures, another Lisbon peripheral city, in 2017, in a PSD-CDS colligation. This came to be Ventura's critical moment. Considering the long-term issues of the Roma community in Loures, Ventura focused his narrative on its welfare dependency (Bugalho, 2017) and illegalities, such as misuse of council houses or using public transport without paying while having Mercedes cars at their door.

Ventura's strategy produces effects. The left has reacted to Ventura's statements, in the media and legally. Several party figures repudiated the comments of the PSD, and the CDS broke the coalition. The far-right PNR party invites Ventura to leave the PSD and join them. The effect is what Ventura wanted: he became a mediatic political personality and made the PSD gain 5,000 votes compared to the previous local elections in 2013.

In 2019, Ventura launched the “Movimento Chega” (Enough Movement) inside PSD to provoke party elections and dispute the leadership with Rui Rio, the Party’s president at that time, with the goal of turning the party to the right. Things went wrong for him. Thus, he abandoned PSD in 2018 and has endeavoured to transform the Chega Movement into a political party. To this end, he sought the support of friends from the PSD youth, those who had been with him in the campaign in Loures, former colleagues from the religious seminary and the law faculty, and students at the University.

Establishing the party was sinuous due to the diverse ideological nature of the pioneers, leading to a two-way crossroad: on one side, a nationalist, Eurosceptic current focused on the idea of the imminent collapse of the European Union and the need to prepare Portugal for future scenarios, led by Jorge Castela, and on the other, a current opposed to Castela’s ideas and more interested in exploring the populist side of Ventura, but in a party-line closer to that of the PSD, perhaps more liberal-conservative. The attempt to conciliate those tendencies led to a party both liberal in economics and conservative in customs matters. As Marchi (2020, p. 209) states, Chega’s inside life is a permanent struggle between a liberal line, concerned with the failures of the democratic regime, and other confessional linked to Christian churches, devoted to matters of values such as anti-LGBT agenda. However, the glue for those current is the combat against “cultural Marxism”, in their terms, a left radical agenda committed to the disintegration of the Portuguese identity through the teaching of gender theories in public schools, the attack on the traditional family and the promotion of abortion as a contraceptive method. Undoubtedly, this certifies the presence of culture wars in Portuguese politics, illustrated by the intense opposition of Ventura’s nativist values and Joacine Katar Moreira’s decolonisation.

Regarding the proposal to return art to its country of origin, Ventura proposed to “return” Joacine back to her country of origin, Guinea-Bissau (Penela, 2020). He also considered Joacine responsible for a hate campaign against Portuguese traditions and historical memory, proposing her expulsion from the Parliament (Pires, 2021). Joacine Katar Moreira is no longer deputy at the Portuguese Parliament after the 2022 legislative elections.

Thus, racism came to be the *pièce de resistance* of Ventura’s parliamentary mediatic activity, side by side with corruption.

3 ANDRÉ VENTURA, THE BLESSED MAN IN A RACISM-FREE PORTUGAL

André Ventura's phenomenon is recent in Portuguese politics but is also well studied, in line with an awakening of academic interest in populism. Marchi's (2020) book caught medial attention. Sixty-seven left-wing intellectuals joined in a manifesto against the book *Against the academic sanitisation of Chega's racism and fascism*. Ilse Gomes Silva's (2020) review of the book presents many critics addressed to the author, following the mentioned manifesto tone, considering that Marchi wrote a linear biographical note on André Ventura and refused to problematize the fascist/far-right and racism face of the politician and his party, focusing the protest anti-systemic dimension. This was because racism is not a part of Chega's program or Ventura's ideological core but an attention grabber to stay in the headlines.

Nevertheless, racism became a critical issue in Ventura's political medial career. Debates with Joacine Katar Moreira (former MP) and SOS Racism Association of president Mamadou Ba take racism to the centre of Ventura's agenda. In 2021, Ventura proposed "Mamadou Ba Law" (Figueiredo, 2021), an amendment to the Nationality Law, which allowed the withdrawal of Portuguese nationality from citizens who offended Portugal. It seems reasonable to assume that André Ventura's aim was not so much to get the law passed as to force a populist dichotomy between good patriotic citizens and an anti-racist, unpatriotic left. Many of the reactions in newspaper comment boxes and social media posts have been removed for racial slurs, but where it is possible to reach them, the nationalist regimentation on André Ventura's side is visible, partly achieved due to Mamadou Ba's populist strategy with aggressive-toned public statements. As a black person, Mamadou Ba has won little sympathy outside the electorate of the radical left, particularly on the axis of the new left.

In 2021, Ventura's party filed a complaint with the Attorney General's Office against Mamadou Ba for insulting the memory of a deceased person, in the case, the memory of Marcelino da Mata, a high combatant and decorated Guinean military in the service of the Portuguese State during the colonial war. Mamadou Ba called Marcelino da Mata a war criminal, while Chega declared him as a representative of Portuguese Luso-colonial patriotism (DN, Lusa, 2021).

Thus, "structural racism does not exist in Portugal" according to Ventura (iOnline, 2021). This idea is not new, and notwithstanding studies (v.g. Marques 2004, 2007; Vala, Brito, Lopes, 1999; Vala, 2021) and international

reports, it is part of what Vala (2021) refers to as national self-esteem. In this sense, it is present in various political parties and Portuguese society (see the discussion in Ferreira Dias, 2021), related to a collective memory elaborated around a “Portugueseness” as an official discourse (de Sousa, 2021), which conveys Portuguese colonial exceptionalism as a safeguard of the overseas humanist vocation of the “Discoveries” (v.g. Ribeiro, 2009) and which includes the denial of racism (Marques, 2007).

3.1 Ventura, the political messiah

As seen in this text, and following the previously discussed (Ferreira Dias, 2021), the messiah-politician is a populist who presents himself as an “outsider” who will lead his people, the “good people”, “the people”, or similar but always honourable and pure citizens, towards a new “nation”, free from the sins of the old politics, corruption, and the wicked – corrupt, welfare abusers, gender ideology. It is a narrative of the “kingdom of God on earth”. The “chosen people”, i.e., “the good people”, will be those who recognise the virtues of his message, the “truths” contained in his discourse, and adhere to it without question. This fertile imaginary opens the way to a modern Sebastianism, seized by André Ventura.

As noticed, this article holds a qualitative methodology of analysis. As previously stated, to highlight the argument of Political-Messianism in Ventura’s political profile, it was searched on Ventura’s Twitter account for specific words, such as “God”, “religion”, “faith”, and “Fatima”, which allowed the identification of two keywords in the relationship between religion and his political mission: “God” and “Fatima”. The selection of Twitter responds to the fact that this social media is privileged by Ventura to create public impact and soundbites (see, v.g. Postill (2018) on the relation between populism and social media) since, on Facebook, he replicates the content. Secondly, Twitter makes a keyword search more reliable; more importantly, it was in that social media that Ventura posted content on religion and his mission.

Thus, using Twitter’s search tool in André Ventura’s account (which he uses intensively, with more than 2,600 tweets from 2019), it was possible to find the use of the word “Deus” (God) seven times connected to his political mission, five times concerning moral values, and twice in the Brazilian expression “Deus no comando” (God in command). Moreover, it was possible to find two references to the miracles of Fatima and Ventura’s political mission. The most significant tweets are to be considered.

In December 2020, the journalistic research magazine “Visão” (Vision) published a lengthy investigation inside Chega, with police cases, party factions, internal confrontations, networks of contacts, and financing. It is an unfavourable portrait for a party that wanted to moralise the national political system. In reaction to it, Ventura tweeted this on 12th December: “God has entrusted me with the difficult but honourable mission of transforming Portugal. And I will not abandon the Portuguese, no matter how many traps are placed in my way.” (Ventura, 2020a) This declaration is in line with Ventura’s religious background, as previously mentioned, but also, more significantly, in line with a messianic narrative. A Portuguese blogger catch this and other Ventura’s declarations to produce a fictional message from Ventura to his supporters, calling it “Epistle of André Ventura to the good Portuguese” (Faria Santos, 2021).

Earlier in the same year (25th July), a survey published in one of the country’s largest newspapers, *Diário de Notícias*, showed that Chega equalled the Left Bloc. In reaction, Ventura commented on Twitter: “Thank you to all Portuguese people who trust us more and more. Thank God for giving me the strength and the opportunity to fight for this country. I will not give up until I win and transform Portugal.” (Ventura, 2020b) Thus, the dominant religious dimension of Portuguese society, between the ecclesiastical framework and popular Catholicism, allows a political appropriation that reinforces the figure of the messiah-politician. Despite his religious beliefs, Ventura looks aware of the importance of religious beliefs to his supporters. On 11th September 2020, he posted a photo in the Vatican saying, “Here the Apostle Saint Peter died and was buried. He knew that he would give his life for what he believed in. Today I contemplated his strength anew and asked God never to let me give up either. (Ventura, 2020c).”

As previously said, Chega holds a Christian tendency, made of Catholics and Evangelists, some of them are from Brazil. This allows Ventura to appropriate Bolsonaro’s Christian message. In a 10th August 2020, tweet of Ventura declared “I am not afraid to say it. I want all Christian churches in CHEGA. All of them. Without fear and prejudice. All other parties have already shown that they are ashamed of our history and the faith of our people. Not us! Not me! God in command!” (Ventura, 2020d).

Ventura continues to punctuate his messianic narrative, using religious references capable of emotionally mobilising his electorate. On his birthday, on 15th January 2022, he tweeted a picture of him kneeling in a church, with the caption, “On my birthday, I thank God for my life and the privilege he gave me to fight this battle for Portugal!” (Ventura 2022)

So, the above makes evident that “God” came related to the idea of fighting for and transforming Portugal, naturally, in the name of the good Christian people and, naturally, against those who make him sound like a danger to the country’s future. (Ventura, 2020e).

In quantitative terms, the frequency of Ventura’s messianic-religious references is residual, with only 14 entries in 2,600 tweets between 2019 and 2022. Although few, they had a good engagement, ranging between 700 and 1,000 likes and between 200 and 700 retweets. Figures above most of his tweets, which tend to have between 50 and 250 likes, and just over 30 retweets. In qualitative terms, the Tweets reveal his strategy of using a background favorable to political messianism.

Additionally to the tweets, Ventura publicly mentioned the idea of God’s plane in his political work on television and campaign several times (Você na TV, 2019). He simply declares, he is chosen to transform Portugal.

At last, it is essential to consider Ventura’s use of Fátima’s miracle. In a few words, the benefit of Fátima happened on May 13th, 1917. It is related to a supposed apparition of the Virgin Mary to three children, shepherdesses. The event of the apparition was repeated over the following five months. These apparitions were preceded and followed by other phenomena that sanctified the place and were decisive for the Portuguese and international Catholic pastoral ministry. Soon pilgrimages came to be part of the Portuguese Catholic experience.

Relative to the relationship between the religious phenomenon of Fátima and Ventura’s political messianism, we find two tweets from the leader of Chega in the period of 2019 to 2022 (among 2,600 tweets in total). Again, it was not the intention to conduct a quantitative analysis by measuring the frequency of use of religious references, knowing in advance the low frequency. But instead, it was intended to highlight the strategic association between religion and political mission in a politician (which is confused with the party) as a Portuguese singularity.

The first, on the 13th of May, 2020, presents an illustration of the Virgin Mary appearing to the little shepherds, saying, “On 13 May 1917, Portugal changed forever. We were chosen! I, too, felt this profound change on May 13 in my life. Today I feel I know that, in some way, my political mission is deeply linked to Fatima. This, perhaps, is my great secret” (Ventura, 2020f). From content point of view, this is a relevant tweet. Firstly, the idea of “chosen people”, a category previously discussed. This classic messianic reference promotes the separation between just people, good, chosen by God, and the others, in religious language, sinners, in political speech, corrupt. Secondly,

Ventura presents himself as someone anointed by the power of the Virgin Mary, of the Lady of Fatima. This unquestionably invokes messianism, as he claims that his political mission is linked to Maria's devotion. Finally, he ends the tweet with a game of symbolic association between the secrets of Fátima (the revelations of the Virgin Mary to the little shepherds) and his Marian devotion as his "secret", that is, his inspiring force to change Portugal, to assert himself as an elected politician, the Portuguese messiah-politician.

The second tweet is from the 31st of May, 2021. Ventura appears praying alongside Salvini, leader of the Italian PRR, with the caption: "Today I have two privileges: to pray in Fatima and to do so alongside Salvini! For a Europe of values!". With this, Ventura reinforced Chega's link to the PRR in Europe. First to his closeness with Marine Le Pen (Ventura, 2021), the leader of French PRR, and then with Matteo Salvini.

In 2021, during the party's Fourth Congress, Ventura retook the messianic speech and performance, kneeling again and invoking Sá Carneiro's legacy. Following his approach to European PRR but also invoking the Estado Novo authoritarian legacy by rescuing its motto "God, Homeland, Family" (Gomes, Coelho, 2021). This strategy reinforces Ventura's charismatic dimension, which allows him to operate in a messianic but also nostalgic framework by invoking positive images of the memory of the Estado Novo dictatorial period. Different authors have shown that memory is reconfigured through time, masking adverse events and making them "gold" (v.g., Pollak, 1989; Boym, 2001; Legg, 2004; Suleimann, 2006).

The figure of a pater, the strong but devout man, enabled Salazar to claim himself as the redeemer, i.e. as the political messiah (Braga da Cruz, 1982; Martins, 2014). It is precisely the same path that André Ventura shows he wants to follow. As Zúquete argues, religious populists believe in having a privileged relationship with the Almighty and then proclaim to be following or fulfilling God's work "on earth against its Godless enemies" (Zúquete, 2017, p. 566-67). Thereby, with their supporters – the "chosen people" – those populists create a moral community.

CONCLUSION

The article intended to answer the following question: do Chega and its leaders, while integrating the formulation of a Populist party of the Radical Right – "identitarians" following Zúquete's (2018) central work – also incorporate a long Portuguese tradition of political messianism? The answer was found in the recent work of the prominent Portuguese political

sociologist (Zúquete 2022), where he states the long-term populism in Portugal, articulated with the historical Sebastianist collective psychology, the Portuguese type of political messianism. Portuguese political and cultural background is deeply embodied with populist and messianic references. From the right to the left and back to the right, the Portuguese political field has been punctuated by populist occurrences, none as evident as André Ventura's case. Because political messianism needs a Judeo-Christian background to promote a Manicheist division of society between the "chosen people" and the Godless impure and corrupt ones, Portugal offers good soil for planting this type of narrative.

In the text, it was possible to align the literature to highlight the relevance of this kind of populist-messianic background in Portugal, integrating the "Chega" party and its leader André Ventura into the frame of it. Taking Ventura's Twitter account, a keyword search revealed the use of two key concepts – "God" and "Fátima" – in promoting his role as a political messiah. Doing God's work and being the hand of God's plan is relevant to Ventura's political personality. Alongside tweets, Ventura also claimed it in interviews and campaigns.

Based on his religious background and affirming his moral Catholic vocation and fidelity to Marian's devotion, André Ventura makes good use of such references to assert himself as the messiah who will lead Portugal into a kingdom of just and honest workers. While safeguarding the positive memory and national self-esteem of a country free of the stain of racism, Ventura also recovers the motto of the Salazar dictatorship: "God, Homeland, and Family", invoking the spirit of Sá Carneiro to capture the electorate of the centre-right, dissatisfied with the direction of the Social Democratic Party (PSD). Ventura thus presents himself as someone who speaks for Sá Carneiro's orphans, seeking a PSD that is more connected to people's daily lives and less elitist but also speaks to those nostalgic for the dictatorship and a more punitive, authoritarian and securitarian regime.

As Peirano (1995) stated, the results are always provisional. Considering the plastic character of populist movements, organic or not always ready to reconfigure themselves through opposite speeches, operating *in momentum*, favouring public perceptions, the conclusion must follow the prior. Perceptions are a central tool in making populist movements in a world of "alternative truths" and "post-truth" (Davis, 2017). Especially regarding the "left-behind (white) working-class", a sum of people is constructed as "the people", "the good people", or the "pure people" (Mudde, 2004). This presents a scenario of political, moral, and civilizational Manichaeism. As

seen, Portugal holds a favourable collective psychological background (Sebastianism) for the emergence of a political Messiah. André Ventura is operating with it.

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