

Deeply Rooted but Still Striving for a Role: The Portuguese *Freguesias* Under Reform

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In political science, the debate about the size of local jurisdictions for the exercise of democratic governance has gained significant traction in recent years. The discussion frequently pits the supporters of the “small is beautiful” motto against the advocates of the “large is lively” argument (Denters et al. 2014). For the purpose of the discussion of sub-municipal units (SMUs), it important to recognize that the “small is beautiful” motto is upheld by the empirical literature linking smaller jurisdiction size with increased voter turnout (Oliver 2000; Larsen 2002), political participation (Verba and Nie 1972; Oliver 2000; Carr and Tavares 2014), and internal political efficacy (Lassen and Serritzlew 2011). The presence of SMUs in a city can be regarded as positive for the quality of the local democracy, as smaller jurisdictions can improve citizen’s feelings of competence to understand as well as participate in local politics. From a quality of democracy perspective, increased municipal fragmentation into SMUs can

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potentially improve the democratic representation and civic and political participation by local citizens (Tavares and Carr 2013). Despite this conjecture, studies of the consequences of SMUs have been largely absent from the Political Science literature, and the few empirical studies conducted so far suggest that SMUs do not raise citizen interest and engagement (Bäck et al. 2005; Swianiewicz 2015).

In Portugal, SMUs are known as parishes (*freguesias*) and have evolved over the last century and a half to become full-fledged, lower-tier local government units. The number of SMUs reached a high of 4259 in 2012, but a territorial reform triggered by the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the IMF/EU/ECB and the Portuguese government in 2013 has reduced this number to 3092 SMUs. However, this territorial reorganization of SMUs appears in a context of national financial crisis associated with the sovereign debt crisis and was not the product of a voluntary decision by either the national or local governments (Teles 2016).

Limited research conducted in the Portuguese context has shown that the fragmentation of municipalities into numerous SMUs likely induces additional spending and inefficiencies (Tavares and Rodrigues 2015), but this effect is countered by a positive impact on political participation due to smaller SMUs. Tavares (2016) finds a negative statistical association between SMU size and electoral participation, even if this effect is mediated by the municipal context where these SMUs operate. These findings are the result of large number of studies using a complete database of Portuguese SMUs, but most of this research has failed to investigate SMUs from a stakeholder's perspective. As a result, not much is known about the processes through which political and civic participation takes place at the sub-municipal level, and comparative research at this level is largely absent in the field of Political Science in Europe.

This chapter aims to contribute to the debate about SMUs in Europe by presenting and discussing the characteristics of SMUs in Portugal. First, we describe the historical evolution of Portuguese parishes (*freguesias*) from their initial religious roots through the conversion into civil parishes and their contemporary constitutional status as local governments. Next, we present the legal framework, structure, and organization of Portuguese SMUs. Section 3 provides some basic facts and figures regarding the number of parishes per registered voters and per area. Section 4 describes the competencies, powers, services, and finances of Portuguese parishes and their relationship with the municipal level. Section 5 summarizes the recent territorial reform that reduced the number of

Portuguese SMUs from 4251 to 3092. The last section concludes this chapter with a brief discussion about the future of Portuguese parishes.

BRIEF HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF *FREGUESIAS*

The origin of Portuguese parishes lies in the first millennium AD, when the Catholic parishes (*paróquias*) were the delegations of the *sedes* or *cathedra*, the primitive episcopal churches (Caetano 2005). The origin of the parishes is exclusively ecclesiastical and goes back to the fifth century. The population of the inland areas and land conquered to the Moors led to the expansion of Christianity to the rural areas and the birth of small population centers. These core areas benefited from the devolution of worship from the cities, allowing the expansion of the parishes. The community was built around the church and the priest following communitarian rules. Given the spiritual connection between the church and its followers, these became known as parishioners (*paroquianos*) and the congregation as the parish (*paróquia*). Until the Liberal Revolution of 1820, which ended the Absolute Monarchy in Portugal, the term *freguês* was used to designate the parishioners, who were the *fregueses* (i.e., customers) of the priest (P. M. de Oliveira and Sá 1950).

The community of *fregueses* or parishioners was organized around the parish as a strong community. Parishes played an important role in the rural areas and less so in urban areas due to the difficulty in differentiating between their interests and those of the municipality. In remote areas, the priest becomes a parental figure and the main support of the parishioners or *fregueses*. It was around the church and the priest that the community grew and its communitarian rules and collective heritage were developed and expanded (P. M. de Oliveira and Sá 1950).

The political expression of the parish lies in the brotherhood (*confraria*) of the Catholic Church, whose implementation follows the stage of publication of the institutions and fundamental regulations for the institutions of the parish. In larger parishes, officials included a judge, a steward, a solicitor/procurator, a clerk/scriver, and a custodian (C. Oliveira 1986). These officials represent the community of parishioners and defend the interests of the Church, serving the government of the parishes in the ecclesiastical causes and divine worship. It was around the church that the parishioners would gather to solve their administrative problems.

Three stages can be identified in the evolution of Portuguese parishes. The first stage begins with the Roman Empire and lasts until 1830. During

this stage, the parish is mainly an ecclesiastical unit. Its origin is associated with the rural expansion and the need to create nuclei of Christianity outside the cities. The Catholic Church was often the only support for the parishioners (*fregueses*) and their congregation. Rural parishes evolved to become a community with distinctive identity. These communities were self-administered by neighbors, featuring a popular judiciary system, initially elected and later confirmed by the king who exercised the authority through the elected judge. In these communities, the priests took on an important role.

During the Liberal Monarchy Period (1820–1910), the legislators were hesitant to assign functions of public administration to local parishes. In 1830, many religious institutions were secularized and a more clear separation between church and state was undertaken. Parishes were incorporated into the administrative system as civil parishes (*paróquias civis*) as opposed to religious parishes (*paróquias eclesiásticas*). During the second stage of parish evolution (1830–1878), the indecision regarding the institutional model of the parish persisted. Decree No. 23 of May 16, 1832, excludes parishes from the division of the territory and the administrative organization by considering them a mere social and religious aggregate. Three years later, the Law of 25 April 1835 attributes administrative functions to the parishes. The Administrative Code of 1836 designates the “administrators of municipalities” and the “commissioners of the parishes.” Secular parishes replace their traditional administrative structures with a modern administrative system and take on various tasks, including the management of assets and income belonging to the parish. In 1836, a major territorial reform eliminated close to 500 municipalities. After the reform, the large average size of municipalities created an opportunity for the survival and thriving of parishes as SMUs in charge of specific tasks.

Balancing between progresses and setbacks, it was only in 1878 that the parish was definitely included as part of the Portuguese administrative system, initially designated as civil parish (*paróquia civil*) and later taking on the name of *freguesia*. After 1878, the Catholic Parishes remained *paróquias*, but their political equivalent became the *freguesia* (Pereira and Almeida 1985). Thus began its journey of consolidation as an administrative unit, maintaining its connection to the Catholic Church that would only be abandoned with the First Republic (1910–1926). After a period of setbacks and loss of political autonomy during the Estado Novo dictatorship (1926–1974), the parishes regained their place in the Portuguese administrative system after the Democratic Revolution in April 25, 1974. Currently, after the territorial reform of 2013, the entire territory of Portugal is divided into 3092 SMUs of the 308 municipalities.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK, STRUCTURE, AND ORGANIZATION

The Portuguese Constitution organizes the state in terms of administration at four different levels: direct, indirect, autonomous, and independent. Local authorities are characterized as units of self-government (Articles 235–243) and, together with the administrative regions and public associations, comprise the state’s autonomous administration. Unlike the direct administration of the state, local authorities do not pursue, through their competencies, powers delegated by direct administration, but rather seek to satisfy the needs felt by the citizens residing in their territories. Local authorities have a high level of autonomy vis-à-vis the central government, since this government can only assess and review the legality of their actions (*tutela administrativa*) with no power of oversight as it does with the direct and indirect state administration. Municipalities are thus defined as public bodies and their territory recognized for seeking to meet the interests of the people that elected them.

Article 236 of the Portuguese Constitution recognizes parishes as full-fledge local governments. Their organization and powers are defined in Law No. 75/2013, September 12. Parishes have democratically elected leaders, including both an executive and a legislative body. The Law defines the Parish Assembly (*Assembleia de Freguesia*) as the deliberative body elected by universal suffrage in proportion to the number of voters. Parish council size is determined according to Law 169/99, September 18 (see Table 9.1). Typically, the Assembly meets in ordinary sessions four times a year and in extraordinary sessions in situations prescribed by the Law.

The Parish Executive (*Junta de Freguesia*) is composed by the parish president and a variable number of cabinet members, two of which will be the secretary and the treasurer during the executive’s term in office. The

Table 9.1 Parish council and parish executive size

<i>Registered voters</i>	<i>Parish council</i>	<i>Parish executive</i>
Less than 1000	7	2
Between 1000 and 5000	9	
Between 5000 and 20,000	13	4
Between 20,000 and 30,000	19	6
For each additional 10,000	+1	

Source: Law 169/99, September 18

parish president is the first candidate on the list receiving most votes to the parish council. The size of each parish executive also varies according to the number of registered voters. The rules are defined by Law 169/99 and presented in Table 9.1.

For the president of the parish executive, the choice between a part-time and a full-time term in office depends on a combination of the number of voters and the area of the parish. The full-time term of office is allowed only in parishes with more than 10,000 voters or, having more than 100 km², in parishes with more than 7000 voters. There is also the possibility of a full-time term in office as long as the salary of the president does not exceed 12% of the total revenues of the parish.

The other members of the board, the secretary and the treasurer, exercise their mandates in accordance to the system applicable to the parish president. Thus, if the president holds office full-time, s/he can share the full-time or part-time with the remaining members of the executive. For example, if the president chooses full-time, s/he can exercise the mandate in part-time, assigning one of the other members of the executive the other half-time.

BASIC FACTS AND FIGURES

Civil parishes are the smallest unit of local government in Portugal and their boundaries are completely contained within a single municipality. The number of parishes per municipality varies significantly, ranging from 1 (in 6 municipalities¹), where the boundary of the parish coincides with the boundary of the municipality, up to 61 (in the municipality of Barcelos), where each parish is essentially equivalent to a neighborhood government.

Parish assembly elections are held on the same day of the municipal executive and municipal council elections. Given the concurrency of local elections, it is not surprising that the descriptive statistics are extremely similar. The average turnout rate in sub-municipal elections in 2009 was 65.5%, ranging between a minimum of 31.4% and a maximum of 92.1% with a standard deviation of 9.49. Similarly, the values for the municipal elections include a 65.9% turnout rate, ranging from a minimum of 46.3% to a maximum of 82.4% with a standard deviation of 7.52.

Tables 9.2 and 9.3 illustrate the extent of what can be called sub-city polycentricity in Portuguese municipalities. The data included in both tables refer to the number of parishes existing before and after the territorial

Table 9.2 Parishes per number of registered voters

<i>Number of registered voters</i>	<i>Before the reform (2013)</i>		<i>After the reform (2013)</i>	
	<i>Parishes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Parishes</i>	<i>%</i>
Less than 150	177	4.16	7	0.23
Between 150 and 1000	1989	46.79	1405	45.44
Between 1000 and 5000	1637	38.51	1288	41.66
Between 5000 and 20,000	375	8.82	299	9.67
More than 20,000	73	1.72	93	3.01
Total of civil parishes	4251	100	3092	100

Source: DGAL—*Direcção Geral das Autarquias Locais* (2003, 2014)

Note: An average of 2483 inhabitants per parish before the reform and an average of 3414 inhabitants after the 2013 Reform. The average number of inhabitants in the 308 municipalities is 34,273

Table 9.3 Parishes per area in square kilometers

<i>Parishes</i>	<i>Before the reform (2013)</i>		<i>After the reform (2013)</i>	
	<i>Parishes</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Parishes</i>	<i>%</i>
Less than 1 km ²	70	1.65	2	0.06
Between 1 and 5 km ²	943	22.18	378	12.23
Between 5 and 10 km ²	931	21.90	581	18.79
Between 10 and 50 km ²	1928	45.35	1719	55.60
Between 50 and 100 km ²	226	5.32	248	8.02
Between 100 and 200 km ²	123	2.89	118	3.82
Between 200 and 400 km ²	29	0.68	42	1.36
More than 400 km ²	1	0.02	4	0.13
Total of civil parishes	4251	100	3092	100

Source: DGAL—*Direcção Geral das Autarquias Locais* (2003, 2014)

Note: On average, each parish had 21.66 km² before 2013 and 29.78 km² after the 2013 Reform

reform of 2013. Table 9.2 displays the number of parishes corresponding to five categories of registered voters as defined by the Portuguese legislation. Table 9.2 shows that many parishes were extremely small: 177 parishes (4.16%) have less than 150 registered voters and 1989 (46.79%) have between 150 and 1000 registered voters. The reform of 2013 aimed at reducing this numbers significantly, though more than 45% of the freguesias still have less than 1000 registered voters. Table 9.3 demonstrates that the variation in parish size is also territorial: almost one-third of the

parishes have, now, less than 10 km² (approximately 3.86 miles²) and only a few hundred are larger than 50 km² (20 miles²).

The initial intent of the territorial reform, which modified the *freguesias* demographical criteria with a stronger differentiation between urban and rural areas, was to reduce its total number by half. It was clear that the main goal was not to increase the efficiency of local administration by means of merging municipalities, but by reducing the number of *freguesias*. They still present several structural imbalances: with weak administrative powers, uneven in terms of registered voters, limited in resources, and highly dependent on the municipality in financial revenue and new competencies.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OR INTRA-MUNICIPAL UNITS?

Competencies, Powers, and Services of Freguesias

By their very nature and size, the parishes are designed to perform tasks in close proximity and interaction with their citizens. In most instances, the parishes encompass less than 5000 registered voters (see Table 9.2) and cover a small territorial area (see Table 9.3), retaining an important role as “neighborhood governments.”

Law no. 75/2013 lists the functional areas where the parishes can exercise their activities: rural and urban equipment, public supply, education, culture and sports, primary healthcare, social welfare, emergency management, environment, economic development, urban and rural land use management, and community protection. Potentially, this is a broad set of functions, but the reality is that human, financial, and technical resources of parish governments are far too limited to allow the implementation all these attributions assigned by law. Recognizing these limitations, the same law defines a more specific set of tasks to be performed by the parish governments (Article 16), including, but not limited to management of children playgrounds and small sports facilities, conservation of public fountains, maintenance of signposts and vertical signs, pathways and sidewalks, management and maintenance of parish properties, graveyard management, maintenance and cleanliness of public washrooms and bathrooms, supply of cleaning products to first grade schools and kindergarten establishments, maintenance of public transportation shelters, registration and licensing of cats and dogs, voter registration, licensing of street fairs and carnivals, and assorted declarations and attestations solicited by citizens. In practice, the parish governments tend to provide these specific services rather than extensively engage in service provision along the broad

functional areas mentioned by Law no. 75/2013. In addition, the parish council has the authority to approve the delegation of tasks through contractual agreements between the municipality and the parish.

SMUs Finances

The parish revenues come from several sources. According to Article 24 of Law 73/2013, the parish governments have own-source revenues, including the revenue resulting from the property tax over rustic/rural buildings, 1% of the property tax collected over urban buildings, fees charged for services provided by parish governments, street markets and fairs, cemeteries, fines and penalties established by law, income derived from property rental, and revenues from concession contracts.

Another major source is revenue sharing by the Portuguese National Government in accordance to Article 238, number 2, of the Portuguese Constitution. According to Article 36 of Law 73/2012, parishes are entitled to a Financial Grant (*Fundo de Financiamento das Freguesias*) corresponding to 2% of the mean of the revenues from personal income tax (IRS), corporate income tax (IRC), and sales tax (IVA) collected in the previous year. The grant is shared by the parishes in line with the criteria identified in Article 38 of the same piece of legislation: parish type (urban, moderately urban, and rural), population density, population, and area. The formula is pre-determined and fixed, thus protecting parishes from manipulation by the national government(s).

Parishes can also rely on short-term credits and loans contracted by the parish executive and approved by the parish council. The credits cannot exceed 10% of the Financial Grant transfer from the national government and the total debt of each parish cannot surpass 50% of total revenues from the previous year.

In contrast, parish revenues also include discretionary grants and transfers by the municipal executive and approved by the city council. These transfers from the municipality to its parishes entail a significant amount of discretionary power by municipal governments, since they are not based on a fixed formula. This is one of the most relevant features of local government's autonomy in Portugal. Even though *freguesias* are considered to be full-fledge local governments, they are historically confined to the municipal borders, their budget and competencies are highly dependent on municipalities' discretionary powers, and—therefore—politically nudged to permanent negotiation with the municipal executive.

Relationship with the Municipal Level

Mayors in Portugal are elected through a closed list proportional representation system. Local elections are mostly partisan elections, even though citizens can present nonpartisan lists since the approval of Organic Law 1/2001 of August 14. One of the unique traits of the executive branch of local government is the formation of minority executives, a product of multiparty elections and proportional representation. On rare occasions, the winning party (and the mayor in office) may not have the majority of members in the cabinet executive. In theory, this suggests political instability and ungovernable municipalities, but practice indicates that the overwhelming majority of municipal executives is stable and lasts the full election cycle.

City councils are responsible for budget approval, set up land use plans, sell municipal bonds, set municipal tax rates, and approve local ordinances and regulations. National legislation imposes a mixed composition of the city council combining parish representatives and at-large elected members. Parish representatives can never outnumber council members elected at-large. As a general rule, the number of members elected at-large needs to exceed in one the number of parish representatives. Consequently, city council size varies with the level of fragmentation of the municipality in SMUs. City councils include all parish presidents (a Portuguese equivalent to district-elected councilors). In municipalities with only a few parishes, the minimum number of elected council members is 15, corresponding to three times the number of members of the municipal executive. Table 9.4 displays the number of parishes per municipality in Portugal (including the Azores and Madeira islands).

Table 9.4 Number of parishes per municipality

<i>Parishes</i>	<i>Before the reform (2013)</i>		<i>After the reform (2013)</i>	
	<i>Municipalities</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Municipalities</i>	<i>%</i>
Less than 10 parishes	164	53.25	182	59.09
Between 10 and 20	88	28.57	92	29.87
Between 20 and 30	27	8.77	21	6.82
Between 30 and 40	18	5.84	10	3.25
Between 40 and 50	2	0.65	2	0.65
More than 50	9	2.92	1	0.32
Total number of municipalities	308	100.00	308	100.00

Source: DGAL—*Direcção Geral das Autarquias Locais* (2003): www.portalautarquivo.com. INE—Instituto Nacional de Estatística (2016): www.ine.pt

Note: On average, 14 parishes per municipality before the reform and 10 parishes after the 2013 Reform

TERRITORIAL REFORM OF PORTUGUESE SMUs

The territorial organization of Portuguese parishes has remained fairly stable over more than a century of existence and was created at a time when population isolation in remote areas required proximity to some type of local authority. Over the years, new parishes were created in heavily populated urban areas without a corresponding reduction in rural areas affected by significant depopulation. As a result, the number of parishes grew significantly, reaching a maximum of 4259 by 2012.

The debate about the territorial reform of Portuguese local governments is not new, as there have been concerns about the inadequacy of the size of local government units and the major population shifts over the past five decades due to rural–urban migration and significant loss of population in almost two-thirds of the municipalities. However, political action on this matter was only undertaken after the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the IMF/EU/ECB and the Portuguese government during the sovereign debt crisis in 2013:

3.44. Reorganise local government administration. There are currently 308 municipalities and 4259 parishes. By July 2012, the government will develop a consolidation plan to reorganise and significantly reduce the number of such entities. The Government will implement these plans based on agreement with EC and IMF staff. These changes, which will come into effect by the beginning of the next local election cycle, will enhance service delivery, improve efficiency, and reduce costs.

In Portugal: Memorandum of Understanding on Specific Economic Policy Conditionality (2011)

The document clearly identifies the need to promote a territorial reform of *all* Portuguese local governments, but the government led by Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho opted for the amalgamation of parishes, leaving municipalities out of the territorial reform to avoid further political confrontation with vested interests at the local level. The municipal amalgamation option has met with strong resistance, since local identity sets in this case a strong societal base (Stoker 2011) for Portuguese local government (Teles 2016). The enactment of a territorial reform focusing exclusively on parishes was the price paid by the national government to fulfill the requirements of the Memorandum of Understanding without affecting the map of municipalities.

Nevertheless, the reform of the territorial map was a key element of the reform program and the reduction of parishes was inevitable, and a way of

presenting the results agreed during the bailout negotiation. However, the substance of the reform, in particular concerning the criteria on which this reduction was based, since civil parishes reflect the value of proximity and democratic accountability, was never under real consideration. Furthermore, the simple merging of these units did not have the expected budget cuts effects.

Political consensus around a significant policy of local government mergers was difficult to attain, particularly when the largest parliamentary parties are highly dependent on their local members and municipal structures, and are, at the same time, historically the ones with most seats at the local level. To produce significant changes, particularly when local borders represent deeply rooted and unaltered territorial identities, would inflame popular resentment against these parties (Teles 2016).

The Council of Ministers Resolution 40/2011 of September 22, also known as The Green Document of the Reform, highlighted four areas where reforms should be undertaken: local corporate sector, territorial reorganization, municipal and intermunicipal management and finances, and local democracy. The first three areas were converted into more or less successful reforms, whereas the fourth was simply ignored, as it was regarded as having less impact on efficiency and cost savings.

With regards to territorial reorganization, the Green Document stated that the main goals were to improve the size and scale of parishes in order to address problems related to the increasing depopulation of the Portuguese territory, the partial overlapping of responsibilities between municipalities and parishes, the excessive sub-municipal territorial fragmentation, and the diminished financial capacity of parish governments. The limitations faced by parishes were regarded as detrimental to the quality of local democracy, since extremely small parishes lack critical mass for democratic practice and a large proportion lacked human, financial, and technical capacity to deliver public services in an effective and efficient manner.

One of the expectations regarding the territorial reform present in the Green Document was that amalgamated parishes could provide better public services to their citizens and, where possible, pursue other responsibilities delegated by the municipalities. This was to be accomplished respecting local specificities, namely differences in terms of population density and urban/rural locations, and keeping parishes as units with social, cultural, and historical identities. So far, no empirical studies have been conducted to assess whether these pre-reform claims have held.

The scarcity of revenues prevents parishes from exercising their autonomy, especially if we consider the proportion of total revenues resulting from transfers from upper levels of government. This excessive financial dependence of the parishes limits their activities and the failure to reverse this situation transforms parishes into mere administrative arms of the state. Thus, the first goal of the territorial reform was an organizational one: amalgamated parishes would benefit from increased resources to assume their self-government status attributed by the Portuguese Constitution.

The second goal of the reform was a financial one. Amalgamated parishes could maximize revenues by virtue of their concentration into a lesser number of local units, rationalize spending on local elected officials, take advantage of scale economies in the delivery of municipal services, and better allocate financial resources transferred from upper-level governments.

Law 22/2012 of May 30 established the criteria for parish amalgamations. In highly dense municipalities (above 1000 residents per square kilometer) and population of 40,000 or higher, the Law required a reduction of 55% of parishes in urban areas and 35% in other areas (Article 6, number 1a). In municipalities with a population density between 100 and 1000 residents and population equal or above 25,000, the Law established a 50% reduction of parishes in urban areas and 30% of parishes in other areas (Article 6, number 1b). Finally, in low-density municipalities (below 100 residents per square kilometer) or below 25,000 residents, Article 6 (number 1c) defined a 50% reduction of parishes located in urban areas and 25% of parishes located in other areas. Article 6 exempts from amalgamation all parishes located in municipalities with four or less parishes and mandated amalgamation of all parishes with less than 150 residents (a total of 177 parishes were under this limit in 2012).

Although the reform was based on criteria mandated by legislation, there was some discretion regarding the actual amalgamation choices. Law 22/2012 allowed if the parish amalgamation maps and reform were proposed and approved voluntarily by the municipal council/assembly, as long as they respected the criteria established by the Law. Sixty-one municipalities opted for these voluntary mergers respecting top-down pre-defined criteria, whereas 168 were forced to accept the new map imposed by a Technical Unit of Territorial Administrative Reform (UTRAT) created by the national government to oversee the Reform. The remaining 49 municipalities of Continental Portugal were not subject to

any changes in their territories, given that they were already in accordance with the Law.

Based on the work developed by the UTRAT, Law 11-A/2013 of January 28 approved the new map of parish governments in Portugal. Annex 1 of the Law establishes new (larger) parishes created by amalgamation, new parishes created as a result of changes to their territorial boundaries, the headquarters of the newly created parishes, and the total number of parishes after the territorial reorganization. The Reform was effectively implemented with the local elections of September 29, 2013.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM SMUs IN PORTUGAL?

The main question on the role of SMUs in Portugal still persists: can these local units be considered local governments? From a constitutional and legal perspective, the answer is definitely positive; this constitutes a singular case in the European territorial landscape, particularly since it is spread all over the Portuguese national territory. In addition, there is no differentiation between rural and urban, nor large and small areas. The *freguesias* constitute an important heritage of the medieval administration and governance, and in most cases of fundamental and deeply rooted local identities. Its inevitable integration into the democratic system of local self-government, during the democratic transition in Portugal, was not necessarily easy, but—nevertheless—impossible to avoid. The democratic constitutional design of the national governance system, particularly its sub-national government tiers required a peaceful and swift transition and adaptation from a long-standing and crystalized institutionalization of local government's arrangements. It would be impossible to consider the possibility of a profound change in the territorial and functional aspects of Portuguese local government.

This is precisely why the answer to the question of whether *freguesias* are *real* local governments is not as easy as presented above. Though with specific competences, constitutionally recognized, with elected bodies, financial resources, and—to a certain degree—considerable autonomy, these SMUs are—de facto—a division of the municipal territory into small units of governance and of democratic representation under the discretionary authority of the municipality's government. This control is exerted in several ways: be it as a consequence of the power to decide which competencies they control, on a yearly basis, be it as a result of the political decision of the majority regarding the annual transfers to the *freguesias*, or

as an outcome of the potential political (and party politics) control over the negotiations between the two authorities.

Portuguese local authorities are still working on the basis of a political and administrative system that resulted from the country's transition to democracy in the 1970s. And, if there is a difference in concepts, *freguesias* are fully fledged *local governments* from a constitutional perspective, but operate as *intra-municipal units* within the actual governance and electoral system. This historical construction of a multilayered sub-national governance system has, evidently, several challenges to meet. Concerning the *freguesias*, though they should not be considered in isolation from the other tiers of government, their two fundamental roles still need further attention: the proximity and democratic function, and the service provision role.

It is still too early to assess if the new structure resulting from the amalgamation reform is better fit for purpose, and whether the major reform goals have been achieved. Nevertheless, if there is one conclusion to take from this process, it is the fact that these SMUs were the only ones under territorial reshaping. The "smaller is better" argument was not strong enough and, at least, at the intra-municipal level, bigger units were implemented in search of efficiency.

The debate on local government in Portugal is open again with a set of decentralization reforms being suggested by the new socialist government, in office since 2015. The challenges met by Portuguese local governments are undeniable when confronted with the complex and multiple issues these reforms aim at. The local governments are increasingly seen as key facilitators of participatory processes, enabling collaborative local action. Therefore, to answer these challenges, it is appropriate to consider the character of places as having an important role regarding practices of citizenship and influencing citizen's capacity to engage in local affairs. Given its historical origins, and its strong identity and communitarian roots, especially in rural areas, this democratic role implies giving a particular attention to the future of *freguesias* in Portugal.

NOTES

1. The six municipalities with one parish are Alpiarça, Barrancos, Castanheira de Pêra, Porto Santo, São Braz de Alportel, and São João da Madeira. The Corvo Island, in the Azores archipelago, has no parishes and benefits from a special status under Portuguese law due to its extremely small size.

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