

# Soares invigorates Portugal's presidential race

By Peter Wise in Lisbon

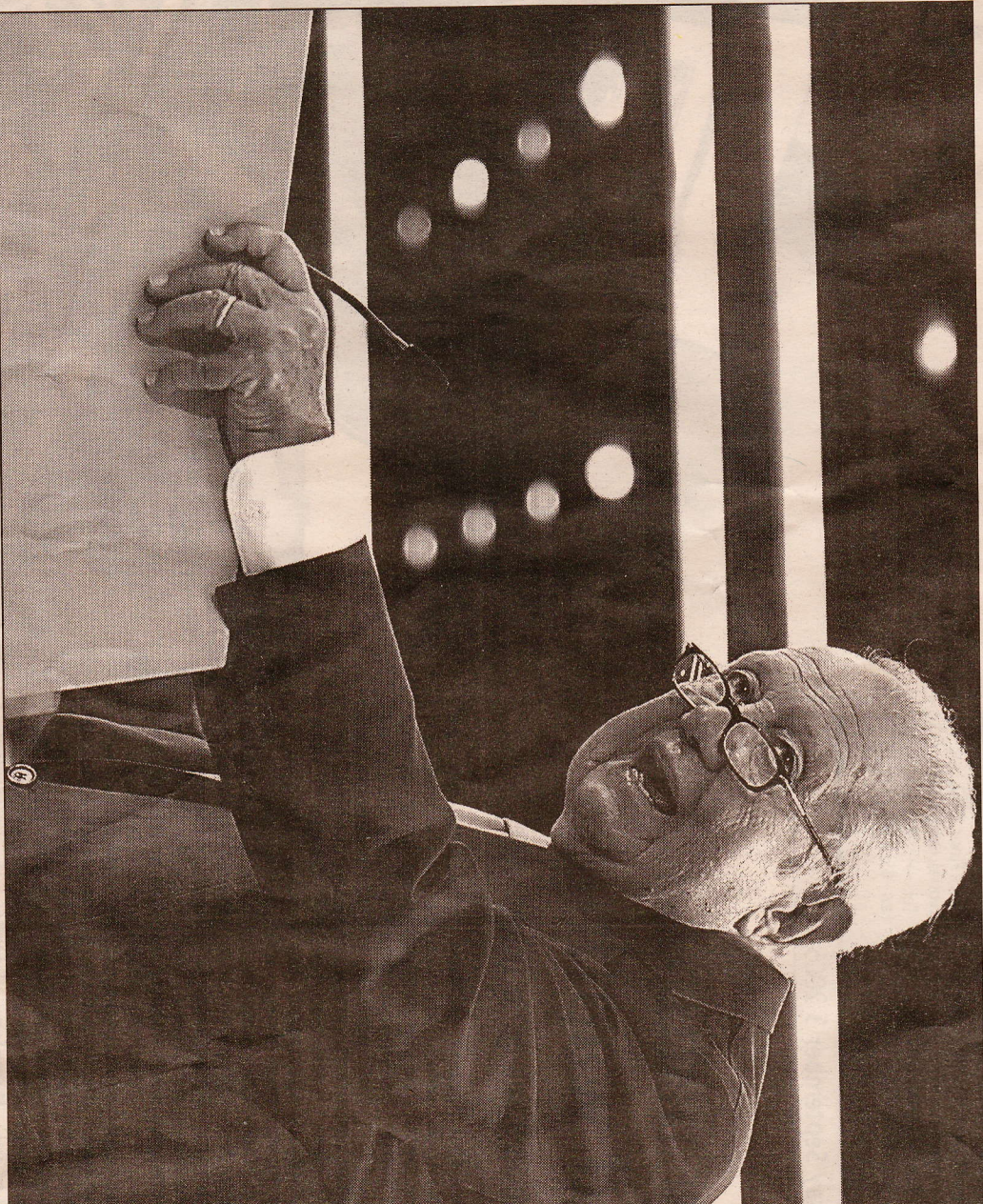
Nine years after saying goodbye to politics, Mário Soares, the main protagonist of Portugal's transition from dictatorship to democracy, this week made a surprise return to the fray by declaring himself a presidential candidate at the age of 80.

The run by the former Socialist prime minister and president is transforming what was expected to be a lukewarm campaign for the January election into a lively ideological battle rife with deep personal rivalries.

Mr Soares will revive his tussles with Anibal Cavaco Silva, Portugal's crisp, conservative prime minister from 1985 to 1995, a period which overlapped with Mr Soares' two-term presidency from 1986 to 1996. Until Mr Soares announced his candidacy, Mr Cavaco Silva was the clear frontrunner in the race. Now, however, a close-run election is looming.

Mr Soares had been ruled out as a contender because of his age and professed retirement. But in the absence of a heavyweight contender on the left, he decided to run, he said this week, to prevent Mr Cavaco Silva winning "as if he was taking a walk in the park".

Mr Soares, a plump, mischievous centre-left Socialist who steered Portugal out of dictatorship into the European Union, relishes campaigning and – a self-confessed bon vivant – is equally at home charming royalty or sparring with



Soares, at 80, announces his candidacy: encouragement for all elderly people who refuse to die before their time

becklers in a street market.

Attempting to brush off concerns about his age, he said at the launch of his campaign: "My candidacy is an encouragement to all

elderly people who refuse to die before their time has come."

The gaunt Mr Cavaco Silva, 66, widely respected for his economic reforms,

including a wide-ranging privatisation programme, is a more austere figure

expected to focus on the need for tough measures to bring Portugal's spiralling

budget deficit under control.

Although he has not yet officially declared himself a candidate, the two parties to the right of centre are banking on him to run. The right

has failed to elect a president in the past 30 years.

However, José Sócrates, Portugal's Socialist prime minister, has given his backing to Mr Soares, a founder and former leader of the Socialist party.

Although Mr Cavaco Silva is arguably more in tune with the prime minister's plans to discipline public finances, the institutional support of a friendly president would be an asset.

Portuguese presidents have no power to legislate, but can veto laws, dissolve parliament and call general elections – a power Jorge Sampaio, the outgoing Socialist president, used decisively during the crisis that led to the election of Mr Sócrates' government in February.

Mr Soares, who has acknowledged a lack of enthusiasm for or expertise in economic affairs, outlined in his speech that Portugal's priorities extended "far beyond mere economic and financial concerns", saying a balanced budget was not an end in itself.

"His clear intention, expressed between every line, was to dismiss Mr Cavaco Silva as a mere professor of economics," the *Diário de Notícias* newspaper said in an editorial.

"The election is shaping up as a contest between optimism represented by Mr Soares and rigor represented by Mr Cavaco Silva," the paper said. "Portugal's problem is that it needs both."

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