The brief period extending from the arrival of the Jewish refugees from Castile in 1492 to the promulgation of the Portuguese expulsion edict in December 1496 witnessed important political developments in Portugal, not least the death of João II and the accession of Manuel I to the throne in October 1495. Historians of Portuguese Jewry have not devoted much attention to these four years. Nevertheless, as will become clear below, the fate of Portuguese Jews and Muslims cannot be studied in isolation but rather has to be understood in the light of three decisive factors: firstly the changing political situation in Portugal, secondly a dramatic shift in the nature of Luso-Castilian diplomatic relations that occurred with the accession of Manuel and thirdly the policies outlined by the new King in his first year in power. The crucial developments that took place during these intervening years were all to be instrumental in bringing about the end of religious tolerance in Portugal. This chapter will endeavour to provide an analysis of these developments and highlight the manner in which they set in motion a chain of events that ultimately led to, amongst other things, the persecution of the Jewish and Muslim minorities in Portugal.

The Last Years of João II (1493–1495):

The Cold War with Castile and the Troubled Succession

The last three years of João II’s reign were overshadowed by intrigues over the succession to the throne and hostile relations with the neighbouring rulers of Castile and Aragon. Even the relative political calm in Portugal that characterised these final years belied tensions that threatened to cause anarchy after the King’s death. To understand these tensions it is necessary to briefly focus on the very start of his reign.

Soon after his accession, in 1481, João II clashed violently with part of his aristocracy. João II held definite views on kingship and wished to tighten royal control of administration but faced opposition from
powerful aristocratic families who had increased their power and influence during the reign of his father. In the parliamentary assembly held at Évora in August 1481, the new King introduced the first measures necessary to establish royal supremacy: all those holding castles were to surrender their titles for confirmation by the Crown. Other reforms continued to attack the privileges enjoyed by powerful noblemen. The most notable was the abolition of the offices of adiantado, regedores and governadores, which had been granted to high noblemen and allowed them to enjoy jurisdiction over judicial affairs in one or more districts. These offices were replaced by magistrates directly appointed by the Crown. Moreover, provincial governors (corregedores) were instructed by the King to enter lands held and administered by nobles in order to supervise their administration.¹

The chief opponents of the King and his reforms were Duke Fernando of Bragança and his cousin Duke Diogo of Viseu. Duke Fernando of Bragança was the greatest landowner in Portugal, personally accumulating the titles of Duke of Bragança and of Guimarães, Marquis of Vila Viçosa and Count of Ourém, Arraiolos and Neiva. According to a later source, the Duke could muster a private army of 3,000 horse and 10,000 infantry.² The Duke of Viseu, for his part, held not only the Dukedom of Viseu but was also lord of Covilhã, the Azores, Madeira and the town of Gouveia. He was Grand Master of the Military Order of Christ and the officer responsible for the border with Castile (fronteiro-mor) in the province of Beira. On top of everything else, Dom Diogo held lucrative monopolies over the production of soap and the fishing of tuna as well as the income from taxes levied in the towns Serpa, Beja and Moura and from the mouraria of Loulé.³

The confrontation between the Crown and these powerful magnates came to a head when letters were discovered amongst the Duke of Bragança’s papers indicating that he had been in communication with Isabel and Fernando with the aim of negotiating a marriage alliance with Castile. The King’s riposte was both swift and fierce. In June 1483, the

² A. Caetano de Sousa, História genealógica da Casa Real Portuguesa (Coimbra, 1948), 5, 234–240.
³ A. de Sousa Silva Costa Lobo, História da sociedade em Portugal no século XV, 467.