Greetings from Athenian democracy

Dimitris Dalakoglou [1] 14 February 2013

The rise of Golden Dawn as a political force on the streets of Athens has provided the Greek state the opportunity to adopt a xenophobic agenda and forcefully eliminate threats to government austerity. The detention and torture of migrant groups and political opponents in the city, seriously call into question the future credibility of Greek democracy.

Over the final few months of 2012, Greek mainstream media have ceased reporting on the neo-Nazi attacks on migrant communities which have blighted Athens for over a year now. Yet in mid-January 2013 one attack did warrant the media’s attention: in the Petralona district of Athens, two Greek men on a motorbike stabbed a Pakistani migrant to death. Thanks to an eye witness the two murderers were arrested a few minutes later. However, there is an evident disjuncture between the infrequent arrests linked to racially motivated violence, and the anecdotal evidence of daily harassment and violence directed at migrant communities in the city. Fear of retribution and the known links between the Greek police force and far-right groups operate to dissuade victims and eye-witnesses from reporting racially-motivated crimes, thus obscuring statistics on racist violence across the country.

Pre-electoral flyers of the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn (GD) were found in one of the murderers houses, in addition to pictures of Michaloliakos, the leader of GD. Michaloliakos’ daughter, a prominent member of her parents’ party, had been arrested for a similar racist attack earlier in 2012. She also participated in a motorbike “patrol” seriously injuring a migrant not far from Petralona district.

The current surge of the far-Right in Greece can be understood as reflective of an increasingly authoritarian and reactionary Government. Since August 2012, central Athens has been subjected to a fundamentally racist, pogrom-styled police operation named ‘Xenios Zeus’ (named after the ancient Greek god of hospitality[1]). Since its inauguration the operation has detained over 60,000 migrants. Yet within the current context of vigilante attacks on migrants by neo-Nazis, such police brutality and criminalization of migrant communities appears restrained: after all, stabbing people of colour on the streets is far worse than arresting them and detaining them without reason.
The rise of Golden Dawn

Thus the rise to prominence of Golden Dawn as a political force, has had a number of benefits for an increasingly unpopular Greek government.

Two of the country’s largest newspapers, on the very same day in September 2012, published two articles with very similar titles, making an almost identical argument about the opportunity that Golden Dawn provided the Greek state. In sum the articles suggest that the emergence of Golden Dawn provides an opportunity for the State to eliminate the “two extremes” of Greek politics. One might suggest that those which the pro-government media label “extremist” are any who criticise or oppose government policy. As such, naming Golden Dawn an “extreme” is misleading, since government and GD share several objectives. Yet the rather simplistic “theory of the two extremes” suggests the current political and social crisis might enable authorities to target the radical Left and anti-authoritarian groups, who -among other things- undertake anti-Nazi activity across the country.

In seamless response to the newspaper articles, the Police launched a large-scale operation targeting such social movements across the country, an operation which opened up space both politically but also physically for neo-Nazi groups like GD to prosper.

In late September 2012 during an anti-fascist motorcycle rally in central Athens, there were clashes with neo-Nazis, the police immediately intervened arresting 15 anti-fascists and torturing the activists. In the police HQ. This was the beginning of the current wave of state targeting of the anti-Nazi movement.

Villa Amalias

Out of the blue, on December 2012 the squat Villa Amalias, was attacked and closed down by the police, who made several arrests. Villa Amalias was once a school, abandoned for almost two decades before squatters occupied it in 1990. The Anarchist squatters worked to conserve the neoclassic building and more importantly opened it up to the community as a self-organised social centre. Villa had a small concert hall where to a great extent the Athenian Punk scene of the 1990s was shaped. It also housed a print press run by Rotta Collective. Rotta printed many of the political posters that cover the walls of central Athens. More recently, anti-fascist squatters alongside migrant
communities have organised to protect areas of Athens from neo-Nazi attacks.

On 9th January 2013, the squatters re-occupied the building for a few hours, before police Special Forces re-evicted the squat arresting the 92 occupiers, and charging them with felonies for having their faces covered; allegedly none of the group had covered faces.

The law that turned covering one’s face into a felony, came into force a few years ago, as a response to increasing public protest. One of the key anti-protest tactics of the Greek Police has been the en-masse use of strong tear gas, usually thrown into the crowd, thus requiring protestors to cover their faces when attending demonstrations. In this manner, the criminalization of covering one’s face is implicitly a criminalization of all public protest. To make things worse, officers from the anti-protest units regularly gave fake testimonies about arrested demonstrators, so that almost everyone arrested during protests these days is charged with felonies based on this so-called hoody-law (Koukoulonomo).

Skaramanga

A few hours after the re-eviction of Villa Amalias on the afternoon of 9th January the police, in a public demonstration of power, evicted another large central Athenian squat, the Skaramanga squat a few blocks away from Villa. Skaramanga has a different story to Villa Amalias, it is a historical offspring of the December 2008 revolt. Also run by an anti-authoritarian collective, Skaramanga had a rich library, and large rooms where talks, film screenings and other events were organised. It also housed the only artificial climbing wall in central Athens, while Yoga and martial arts classes were provided weekly, to mention but a few of the activities, all these of course gratis. From time to time the squats would organise benefit events to raise money for building maintenance, but otherwise their activities were located outside the commercial nexus. Skaramanga was also a part of the local anti-Nazi infrastructure, as its residents and participants actively participated in anti-racist activity.

On January 2013, a few days after these police raids, 10,000 people marched in the centre of Athens in solidarity with the squats and the 92 people arrested during the re-eviction of Villa Amalias.

Two days later, police raided one more central Athenian Squat, Lela Karagiannis. Whilst “leaked” police information has revealed government plans to evict 40 such self-organised projects (squats) across the country. Lela was eventually taken back by the squatters.
All three Athenian squats have been targeted physically and verbally by Golden Dawn several times since the Party appeared on the streets of the city in the early 1990s. The Government, in taking down key anti-fascist strongholds in the city -while chasing and detaining migrants- in a sense, is directly adopting Golden Dawn’s agenda, normalising authoritarianism and legitimising racist attacks in the city.

Bombs, neoliberalism and neo-Nazism

Within this climate of political tension, on Sunday 20th January 2013 a bomb exploded in The Mall; one of the largest shopping centres in the county. Whilst, a few days earlier unknown persons had opened fire at the offices of New Democracy, the ruling party in the government coalition. The Mall according to local residents, who have campaigned against its construction for a number of years, is one of the largest pre-Olympic scandals. Its construction belied planning regulations and the legal case is still pending in the courts, The Mall has nevertheless functioned in stasis for almost a decade now.

The government rushed to exploit the two hits and suggested publically that the second largest parliamentary party (The Coalition of the Radical Left) due to their previous criticism of the mall’s construction, were indirectly linked to the attack. Similar claims were made in reference to the attacks on the New Democracy offices. Thus after migrants and anarchists the institutional Left has become the new “extreme” targeted by an increasingly authoritarian Greek ruling coalition.

The Metro strike

Workers unions have also been targeted by the government. During late January 2013, several unions were on strike with the metro workers’ industrial action lasting eight days. Their demands were not extravagant; they have been forced to accept a significant reduction to their salaries, like most civil servants and pensioners who have lost over 40% of their income within the last 2 years. This is with some exceptions, such as the anti-protest units of the police force whose salaries have so far been ring-fenced. After eight days of striking these protected police units raided the metro depot in Sepolia at four o’clock on the morning, breaking the metro workers strike. Based on a decree issued in the very early days of post-dictatorial “democracy” in 1974, strikers may be conscripted to go back to their work if issued notices. If they refuse they are arrested and charged.

During protests in Athens over the past couple of years a popular slogan has been “Bread-Education-Freedom, The junta did not end in 1973”. This is true, the colonels’ far-right dictatorship did not end in 1973 but in 1974; when the military government of Greece attempted a coup in Cyprus, allowing the Turkish army to invade the island. However, the current slogan refers to 1973 because on November 1973 a popular uprising (carrying the slogan “Bread! Education! Freedom!”) and its violent repression, signified the beginning of the dictatorship’s collapse.

Today the crisis has provided the State with the ideal opportunity to rid society of the right to industrial action, rights to public protest, rights to a decent income and even the right to voice opposition to the government! Moreover, a coalition of state apparatuses and neo-Nazi street gangs, routinely target migrant communities, anti-fascists, social centres and the Left.

Admittedly, such escalation in authoritarianism influences international and local perceptions that the Greek political system is moving toward something reminiscent of military dictatorship. Yet at the same time the contemporary regime is far more elaborate than previous systems. After all there is no coup, both Golden Dawn and the current governmental coalition parties have been voted to power by millions of voters in the summer 2012. In principle today we are dealing with a political regime which is both unjust and extremely violent, yet remains supposedly democratic. A political phenomenon which forces one to question the links between democracy, capitalism and the politics of the far-Right.
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