Golden Dawn arrests: a victory for democracy in Greece?

Sappho Xenakis [1] 30 September 2013

The Greek government has finally launched action against Golden Dawn, a far-right party long tainted by its association with violence. But the timing of this action casts doubt on the depth of the government’s commitment to countering far-right violence in the country.

Coming just days after a Demos report identified Greece as experiencing one of the most worrying and most dramatic cases of democratic ‘backsliding’ in Europe, the sudden onslaught of action taken by the Greek state against the far-right party Golden Dawn (Chrysi Avgi) appears at first glance to have come as a firm riposte to such negative diagnoses.[1]

Following the arrest of a member of Golden Dawn for the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, a left-wing anti-fascist musician, in mid-September, the Greek Minister of Public Order and Citizen Protection sent to the country’s Supreme Court prosecutor a list of criminal offences believed to have been carried out by Golden Dawn members and supporters, asking that those offences be considered as acts perpetrated by a criminal organisation, in order thereby to raise the prospect of harsher penal outcomes than would otherwise be feasible. Brandishing charges of involvement in a criminal organisation responsible for multiple cases of homicide, the training of paramilitary assault battalions, money laundering, and other offences, the Greek state has since arrested a number of MPs and other members of Golden Dawn, raided several of their homes and party offices.

Albeit with characteristically long delay, the Greek state is taking action. Many Greeks are awaiting reassurance that the centrist government coalition, dominated by the nominally centre-right New Democracy party, will follow through on its apparent newfound commitment to the rule of democratic law and order whilst maintaining political stability. A prerequisite to weighing the grounds for optimism, however, is establishing just why state action against Golden Dawn has happened now.

Why not sooner?

One obvious puzzle is why the Greek government pushed state authorities into action against Golden Dawn now and not sooner. Recent years have seen media and NGO reports citing homicides and other violent attacks allegedly perpetrated by members or supporters of Golden Dawn operating in roving vigilante gangs armed with sticks, crowbars, and knives, as well as the existence of Golden Dawn weapon caches and the development of a paramilitary wing of the party, none of which provoked any such spectacular demonstration of concern on the part of state authorities.

The fact that the current operation has been executed without the introduction of any new legal measures, exceptional or otherwise, indicates that the tardiness of state action against Golden Dawn was not due to any deficiencies in the country’s legislative arsenal. Moreover, both the speed and the scope of the charges being made against Golden Dawn MPs suggest that prior inaction against the party was not due to a lack of evidence available to the authorities (notwithstanding some trepidation as to whether the body of evidence underpinning the ongoing prosecution will prove to be as rich as would be expected if the Greek authorities have been investigating alleged Golden Dawn crimes over recent years with the vigour and consistency that the government has repeatedly claimed).
Much has been made of the point that the murder of Pavlos Fyssas was a landmark attack: the first time that a Greek was killed by individuals associated with Golden Dawn, driving in turn revulsion for the party amongst a public hitherto unstirred by the killings of immigrants occurring over recent years.

Yet the translation of this latest event into a moment of political watershed has been far from inevitable. New Democracy was conspicuous in its belated public response to the killing, and prominent figures from the party have since undermined the seriousness of Golden Dawn’s alleged relationship with violence by insisting that the radical-left party Syriza (the principal parliamentary party of opposition) should be considered equally pro-violence and anti-democratic in character.

More generally, the key to explaining why action against Golden Dawn did not take place sooner is that policy and practice on the issue of far-right violence have to date been kept subdued by New Democracy’s strategy of ambivalence towards Golden Dawn, designed to seduce Golden Dawn voters (a significant proportion of whom were formerly New Democracy supporters) at the same time as keeping ajar the door to parliamentary co-operation with the party. Indeed, New Democracy, and the coalition government more broadly, have benefited from the electoral dividend provided by what has been the growing support for Golden Dawn amongst the public, not least because such support has helped check the rise of Syriza.

Why now?

It would be too hasty to suggest that state action against Golden Dawn has arisen at this particular historical juncture simply because of the magnitude of public outrage that followed the murder of Pavlos Fyssas. In fact, whilst there has been evidence of significant public concern about the murder and its broader implications for socio-political stability in the country, anti-fascist protests following the murder were not themselves of a scale or character to force the government’s hand; around 10,000 people are estimated to have taken part in the protest which took place in Athens, and ensuing violence between police and a few dozen protestors ended that evening without apparently causing any major damage.

What may have helped to persuade the government to react now in the way it has done were opinion poll results showing a drop in support for Golden Dawn following the murder, implying that this was a timely opportunity for the government to provoke the instigation of criminal prosecutions against the party. Polls over recent months have shown that the majority of individuals withdrawing their support for Golden Dawn have been transferring it to New Democracy, thereby helping the latter to maintain its very small polling advantage over Syriza. This pattern of the transfer of support has become stronger, suggesting the appeal for the government of taking action against Golden Dawn at this point in time.

Evidently, domestic political pressures working to entice government action have been compounded by those mounting from the international arena. Over recent weeks and months, international media coverage highlighting the reluctance of the Greek state to effectively counter violent far-right activities in the country (as well as alleged complicity in far-right crimes on the part of some state actors), has been accompanied by public chastisement from figureheads of the European establishment, ranging from the leader of the European Parliament’s Socialist Group to the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights. With the January start of the country’s six-month presidency of the European Council looming, such foreign attention may well have encouraged the government to see benefits in shifting gear into a harder stance on Golden Dawn.

Tests of the government’s commitment

The incentives that seem to have motivated the Greek government’s newfound energy in countering far-right violence suggest considerable limits to the political commitment underpinning this development. In light of the ease and rapidity with which the restrictions of parliamentary immunity from prosecution were circumvented this September – an efficacy unprecedented in Greece’s post-dictatorship experience – the actions taken are widely being lauded as powerful symbolic
testaments to the Greek government’s commitment to addressing the allegations relating to the criminal activities of Golden Dawn.

The test of the firmness of the government’s commitment to countering far-right violence will nevertheless lie in the developments of the weeks and months ahead, including in the range and success of the charges leveled against party members and supporters, the severity of the penalties applied and carried out, and the diligence with which far-right violence is policed and prosecuted from now on.

Already, concerns have been raised by the apparently slim list of murders and attempted murders that formed the basis of the file that the Greek Minister of Public Order and Citizen Protection submitted to the Supreme Court prosecutor to instigate prosecutions and arrests. The details of the numbers and types of violent acts with which Golden Dawn is charged will be important indicators of whether the objective of the current drive is to fundamentally challenge far-right violence or merely to remove a select few Golden Dawn figures from the political arena in a flourish of public grandstanding.

Another telling indicator will be whether allegations relating to Golden Dawn’s equipment and training of a paramilitary wing will be addressed by the prosecution with a gravity and determination which matches that displayed in prosecutions that have taken place over recent years in relation to covert groups engaged in far-left and anarchist violence in Greece (from the 17 November group to Revolutionary Struggle).[iii]

More generally, however, it is important to recognise that even the wholesale removal of Golden Dawn from the political scene would be unlikely to suffice in any effort to quash far-right violence in the country. Rather, as the European Commissioner for Human Rights has advised since Fyssas' murder,

“a profound overhaul of policies to counter hate, especially racist, crime is necessary, starting with systematic, continuous training of judges, prosecutors and the police, and addressing the serious dysfunctions in this domain that have, for a long time, been the object of international criticism.”[iv]

All this remains a matter of urgency given that attacks by far-right vigilantes have not ceased in the wake of the killing of Fyssas and, according to a report submitted by the Greek Ombudsman to the Greek parliament just last week, racist violence in the country has continued to rise.


[iv] ‘Nils Muižnieks: Greece “in its Right” to Ban Golden Dawn’, Human Rights Europe 25 September 2013. Available at:


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