

Greek Drama: A Preliminary Review of the First Four Weeks of the SYRIZA Government

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[Greek Solidarity Campaign](#), posted at [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) — The Greek epic has already acquired all the features of an exciting action thriller, with all the appropriate drama (and hubbub), with constant surprises, twists and turns. And we still are at the opening scenes.

The exhilarating SYRIZA win, with thousands of activists across Europe gathering in Athens on election day to be part of “history in the making”, the cliff hanger on the night as to whether SYRIZA would secure an absolute majority, the breathtaking speed with which the new government was formed and hit the ground running, all helped to set the scene and the pace of the thriller.

The speed, the exceptionally high-calibre of the new cabinet and the frenetic diplomatic and charm offensives of Alexis Tsipras and his ministers, kept the interest and the energy levels high and in a certain way has taken Europe by a storm. Overnight, Tsipras and Yanis Varoufakis, his finance minister, became celebrities, with very few other European politicians having anywhere near the same levels of recognition.

And then the skirmishes around last week’s early negotiations with the powers that be, with the daily and sometimes hourly twists and turns, leaks, claims and counterclaims, accusations and counter-accusations, have raised the suspense and the adrenalin levels even higher. It is hard to believe that the elections happened less than a month ago; normally a new government would still be finding its feet and only just starting to get its hands on the reins.

Taking stock

But the dramatic last few days, with all these hastily convened Eurogroup meetings (three within a week) have already started raising certain questions and it is worth taking stock. Is the SYRIZA government up to the mammoth task it has undertaken? Is the mighty self-appointed queen of Europe Angela Merkel and the international neoliberal establishment behind her, worried? Have the Greeks already started capitulating against the overwhelming odds? Are they still on course to deliver what they had promised before the elections, or have they already compromised?

Although it is early days yet, the pundits have started already expressing opinions. But before we go any further, let’s remind ourselves of a few basic facts.

First, this is not, and never was meant to be, a fight of equals; what we have is a small

David fighting with bare hands against a well-armed mighty Goliath. No one, not least the Greeks who voted for SYRIZA, expected the powers that be to concede the Greek demands without an almighty fight and, in any case, not so soon. They know that the odds are overwhelmingly against them and they are prepared and bracing themselves for a long and most probably bloody fight. No one in Greece had any illusions about that when they voted SYRIZA. The simple fact that Greece has no option but to challenge the very basis of the current political status quo of the whole EU and beyond, as the only conceivable way of extracting the country from the deadly embrace of its “saviours”, ensures that this is so.

Second, this is not, and never was meant to be, a simple battle of wills and force (otherwise the Greeks would not stand a chance and they never had any illusions about it). It is also about brinkmanship, tactics, determination, speed of reactions and much more.

Third, it has to be understood that this is not an economic issue, however much the establishment wants to present it as such. It is a political issue and one of major importance to all of us across Europe and beyond. If it was just an economic issue, the amounts involved (even including some write-off of parts of the debt to render it sustainable), albeit significant for Greece (whose GDP accounts for less than 2% of EU’s GDP), are so small within the European context (say in comparison with what the UK had to pay to bail out its banks, or the EU’s current quantitative easing) that a solution would have been found already.

The real sticky point, and the reason why Germany and the interests it represents at this junction are determined to prevent an early solution, is their, justifiable in my view, fear of what they call “contagion” i.e. that if the new Greek government appears to be winning any serious concessions, or is allowed to even try its alternative to the current austerity based, neoliberal political orthodoxy and status quo, it will inevitably encourage other EU countries to follow the same path, resulting in a fundamental political shift of monumental proportions.

Finally, this it is not a simple match between two teams, with the winner decided within a fixed amount of time. What we’ve seen until now is nothing more than the opening shots, the early skirmishes, jostling for tactical positions for the real fight which is yet to come.

Crucially, this week’s negotiations had very little to do with the actual substance of the matter; they were more about impressions, messages and tactical positioning, hence the almost absurd emphasis on wording. It is true that the Greek government, desperate to secure some breathing space in order to start its reforms and the implementation of its pre-election promises, has its eye on the substance. The other side, however, is far less interested in the substance, its main priority being to ensure that the Greek government appears defeated, chastened, discredited, so that it sends a message to any other country whose people may be thinking of going down a similar path.

You can bet that whatever deal is negotiated, either now or in the near future, Merkel or Germany’s finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble and any others among her acolytes speaking on her behalf, would present it, whatever the deal, as a humiliating defeat of, and a climbdown by, the Greeks. And of course, at the same time, this tactic also aims to divide the Greek people, the party of SYRIZA and their supporters across the world.

Within this context, some early observations:

SYRIZA and the Greek population know that they cannot win this uneven battle on their

own. They need to both marshal support from outside forces and ensure that the country inside is united in its resolve and behind the government's efforts. And on both these counts, the early indications are that the Greek government has scored some important points.

Last week, opinion polls indicated that 65-80% of all Greeks, regardless of what party they had voted for two weeks earlier, are behind the government and trust it. The change in the public mood, the new self-confidence, pride and determination is palpable. For the first time we have mass demonstrations in Greece in support of, rather than against, the government of the day.

Similarly with securing allies from outside the country. Tsipras's government knows that it cannot rely on the current political establishment in other countries and therefore he has to reach beyond them, speaking directly to the public and the civic institutions, like social movements, trade unions and so on. Again European public opinion is turning. Awareness of the issues and with it support for "little David" has been growing with amazing speed. Even the traditionally hostile German public (few weeks ago up to 75% of Germans wanted Greece expelled from the Eurozone) is turning (last week an opinion poll indicated that now 51% want Greece to stay!).

These are useful tactical positions, achieved by the new government in preparation for the big battles that lie ahead.

As regards last week's bruising exchanges and negotiations, it is obvious that the first priority of the Greek government was to avoid a direct clash at this early stage, something that the other side seemed determined to provoke; witness the constant provocation, the insulting language that German ministers, officials and puppets have used e.g. Shauble calling the Greek proposals vague, naive and "Trojan Horse" like, or the chief executive of the German Stock exchange likening Tsipras and Varoufakis to the Taliban and so on. These very undiplomatic and provocative statements were released on the run up to the last crucial meeting of the Eurozone finance ministers, i.e. what was meant to be a major "diplomatic" effort to negotiate a mutually beneficial agreement between two EU partners!

The Greeks seem to have resisted these challenges and by carefully using constructive language, constantly talking positively about, and even praising, their opponents, always stressing that what they want is a fair deal to the benefit of all sides and so on, they have managed to create a pressure on the hawks and to avoid this trap of an early showdown. Instead they seem close to having secured the desperately needed breathing space they are seeking.

On the substance of the draft agreement reached (which has already been attacked by Greece's enemies and a number of friends and so-called friends as a sell-out, compromise, betrayal etc.) the bottom line is that, whatever the wording and the public statements, when you analyse it carefully it does not close the door on Greece eventually achieving virtually everything it wants, (albeit with some measures probably delayed for a few months, hence the current statements from SYRIZA MPs that they are still on course to deliver their promises within their four-year term).

Whether they will succeed (and let's not forget that it is still a case of a small David and a mighty Goliath) remains to be seen. But at the moment they seem to be on course, however heavy the odds are against them. The average Greek is relieved that this early showdown

was avoided at this stage and they seem satisfied that they have at last a government that is, at least, fighting on the international scene on their behalf. They have no illusions (and never had) about the difficulties ahead, or the size of the odds against them.

The showdown may still happen at some time down the line; but, when it happens, if it happens, the SYRIZA government would have a lot more public support, both inside and outside the country, having demonstrated that it did everything possible to avoid it.

Conclusion

I think that the Greek government needs right now all the support we can all provide, always remembering that this is not just about Greece, but about all of us, all the anti-austerity, anti-corruption and democratic movements across Europe. The stakes are high for all of us. This is our war and Greece happens at this junction to be the frontline.

The bottom line is that now that the war has started, either one side will win, or the other. If we allow the Greek government to fail at this stage, we will not only see the current historic window of hope closing and the whole progressive movement set back for a very long time. We will also have allowed a situation whereby the only outlets left for the growing popular discontent with the current neoliberal, austerity-based, anti-democratic stranglehold of all our countries, would be the growing extreme right and neo-fascist forces (complemented no doubt, due to the frustration and defeatism, by a small rump of probably equally dangerous extremely militant nihilistic movements).

And within this context, anything anyone of us says or does, at least for the next few months while the hope is still alive, has to be filtered through an assessment of which side of this war it helps and which side it undermines.

Above all, I would suggest that we must avoid for the moment, however apprehensive we some of us may be, any talk of betrayals, compromises and what have you, however inevitable such things appear and however habitual these things are within our, undoubtedly well-meaning, left circles.

Of course, the drama keeps unfolding and, like all of us, I cannot wait for the next instalment of this exciting thriller, not just as a passive viewer, but, hopefully, as an active participant.

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