

# The Greek Left and the Rise of Neo-Fascism

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For the past months there has been an intense debate both in Greece but also in international media regarding the rise of the neo-fascist Golden Dawn in Greece. The reason is obvious: for the first time in a European Union (EU) country a political party that in contrast to most of the varieties of the European far Right does little to hide its openly neo-nazi ideology and the culture of the nazi street gang that has been its trademark since the 1990s, has been one of the rising political forces. Until now the most common mainstream attitude regarding the [Golden Dawn](#) is to treat it as a worrying exception in a period of social and political crisis. This is echoed in the official discourse about the rise of the political “extremes” in Greece (the other extreme being the Left) against which the institutions of liberal democracy must be defended. However, what is missing from this discourse on Golden Dawn as an extreme exception is a serious discussion of what led to its spectacular entrance in the Greek political scene.



Such a discussion and scrutiny would have shown that the rise of Golden Dawn would not have been possible, without the persisting reproduction in the discourse of the traditional Greek Right of very authoritarian conservative “law and order” elements, galvanized by the equally persisting ideological and institutional anticommunism that is the common trait that links the collaborators with the Nazis during the Occupation, the post-Civil War governments that imprisoned and executed left wing militants, the 1967-74 military dictatorship, and the post-1974 authoritarian democracy. This long authoritarian and anticommunist tradition of the Greek Right that can also account for the conscious choice, for many years, of the leadership of the security forces to not only tolerate but also endorse far-right ideological orientations especially within police special forces, based on the assumption that only a perverse combination of militarism and fascism can make a 20 year old believe that the merciless beating of protesters is a decent way to make a living. The result is that in the 2012 general election approximately 50 per cent of [riot police voted](#) for Golden Dawn.

## Blaming the Immigrants

Moreover, the rise of the Golden Dawn cannot be explained without taking into account the conscious choice from the part of mainstream parties, New Democracy and PASOK, to endorse anti-immigrant politics and rhetoric and open racism. When in January 2011 PASOK ministers were referring to the 300 heroic immigrant hunger strikers as if they were sub-humans and were planning a big program of building new detention centers, or when today the [Samaras](#) government announces a crackdown on “illegal immigrants,” it is obvious that the average Golden Dawn member or supporter feels entirely justified in promoting and engaging in open violence against immigrants. In the same manner, such official anti-

immigrant policies act as a justification for those employers who rely on immigrant labour to engage in extreme cases of exploitation and violence, exemplified in the recent beating and chaining of an Egyptian immigrant working at a bakery in Salamis who simply demanded to get his wages. No wonder that such strata of small employers have increasingly turned toward the fascists.

At the same time the rise of Golden Dawn is also an indication of an extreme social and political crisis in Greece and widespread feelings of anger that do not always take the form of collective struggle. When anger takes the form of such an individualized despair and is combined with the repulsing ideological residue of authoritarianism, conservatism, nationalism, “lumpen” sexism and violence, still pervading aspects of Greek society, then it takes the form not of social solidarity and common struggle but of a variety of social cannibalism that can easily be represented and manipulated by the fascists.

In order to understand the rise of Golden Dawn, we must also take into consideration another important development in the past two years, namely the fact that the political system has more or less endorsed the transition toward an authoritarian “state of emergency” as a result of the economic crisis. The practice of passing laws through parliament in special fast sessions, without any actual discussion, even if we are talking about the complete overhaul of labour law, the dismantling of social rights through simple acts of cabinet, the extreme police violence against protesters and the intensified effort toward the penalization of collective forms of protest (occupations etc.), lead to the legitimization of a “strong State” that will “deal with anomie.” This, in its turn, only gives extra legitimacy to the Golden Dawn’s openly authoritarian, ultra-conservative, and – despite the populist references to “Greek workers” – openly pro-business discourse.

In a way we are dealing with complementary processes: On the one hand we have the authoritarian turn of government and state practices, in a combination of neoliberalism and authoritarian statism, in a situation marked by open political crisis, an erosion of popular sovereignty and a complete disregard for democratic procedure. On the other hand, we have a shift of the discourse of mainstream parties to the right, both as an expression of the changes in policies and strategy but also as a result of the rise of Golden Dawn, which also acts as a catalyst for this right wing turn. The recent wave of anti-immigrant raids by Greek police and the decision of the Samaras government to make naturalization even more difficult (in a country where naturalization was already practically impossible for most immigrants) are just some of the examples of these changes. This does not mean that we are dealing simply with Golden Dawn changing the political debate; in reality mainstream parties use the rise of Golden Dawn as an opportunity to bring forward their own more conservative positions.

In light of the above, the cynicism of the “two extremes” schema becomes evident. According to this the social and political crisis has led large segments of Greek society in a state of anomie exemplified both in “anomic” social protests, but also the rise of Golden Dawn. For some neoliberal commentators the rise of Golden Dawn is an indirect result of the 2011 Movement of the Squares, because of the latter’s supposedly “anti-parliamentary” and “populist” discourse. Nothing is further from the truth. Were it not for the Movement of the Squares in May-June 2011, that followed the winter 2010-2011 with its series of racist attacks, the situation regarding the far Right would have been worse. In reality, the “two extremes theory” is an attack on mass movements and the Left. By hypocritically attacking Golden Dawn’s “anomie” they attempt to legitimize the backlash against mass protest, the use of extremely violent police practices (preventive arrests, plastic bullets, water cannons),

the attempt to penalize forms of protest that until now were considered legitimate (occupations of public buildings etc.).

## **Combating the Right**

“The answer to the Golden Dawn can only come from the Left and mass social movements. And this is an urgent task, since currently the rise of the appeal of Golden Dawn acts as a barrier to the further shift to the Left of petty bourgeois and labour strata that until recently were part of the electorate of mainstream parties. ”

Therefore it is no use for the Left to think the potential answer to the rise of Golden Dawn in terms of a broad alliance of the parties of the “constitutional arc.” Despite their rhetoric condemnation of Golden Dawn, both PASOK and DHMAR (Democratic Left) have pushed for the current authoritarian turn and have accepted the condition of limited democracy and popular sovereignty imposed by the EU-IMF-ECB Troika. The answer to the Golden Dawn can only come from the Left and mass social movements. And this is an urgent task, since currently the rise of the appeal of Golden Dawn acts as a barrier to the further shift to the Left of petty bourgeois and labour strata that until recently were part of the electorate of mainstream parties.

But this means the Left must deal with important challenges:

A) It is well known that fascist movements are always fuelled by despair and insecurity, especially individualized despair. Unless broad segments of society regain some form of collective confidence in the ability to change their lives, through struggle, collective fight and solidarity, one can expect the continuous rise of fascists. The simple promise of a Left government cannot lead to such a collective confidence. If we cannot show that collective struggle can make sure that no household will be without electricity, no person without some access to medical care, no child without school lunch, if we do not manage to actually resist aspects of the austerity measures, if we do not show that solidarity between Greek and immigrant workers is the best way to make neighborhoods safer, then the appeal of the Golden Dawn, with all its over-publicized acts of “solidarity only for Greeks,” will continue to rise. Golden Dawn is trying to build the forms of its own reactionary hegemony in segments of the subaltern classes; the Left has not the luxury of simply waiting for governmental power as a “ripe fruit.”

B) Moreover, the Left should not leave “national” references to the fascists. The current conjuncture also takes the form of a national crisis. Not in the sense described by traditionally reactionary nationalist discourse about a “conspiracy of foreigners against the nation,” but in the sense that the almost neocolonial supervision of a society by the Troika, the attempt to turn Greece into a “Special Economic Zone” for foreign capital, the new forms of “European Economic Governance,” lead to a condition of limited national and popular sovereignty that Greek capital fully accepts as a means to impose an aggressive accumulation regime. The Left needs to rethink some form of collective identity for the people living and working in this country, not in the sense of nationalism but of the collective effort to build a common future. The anticapitalist social alliance that can lead to the “Socialism of the 21st Century” cannot be some form of a “nomadic multitude.” It will be much closer to a renewed form of a “sovereign people” engaged in a democratic process of social transformation.

C) The Left cannot leave questions of corruption to the far Right rhetoric. Attacking corruption and the links between mainstream politicians and Capital does not mean endorsing some form of reactionary discourse on “cleptocracy.” Nor does it mean fantasizing about a more “moral” capitalism. But capitalism is not only about impersonal social forms and structures; it is also based on very specific money ties between business and politics. During the Movement of the Squares actions, one of the most common thing to be heard was the repeated cry “Thieves!” directed against parliament, this was not a manifestation of a right-wing “antipolitical” stance, but a justified reaction against a political class that has combined full endorsement of aggressive neoliberalism with increasing personal wealth.

D) Finally the Left does not have the luxury to avoid direct confrontation with the fascists and their military and territorial conception of politics in terms of controlling areas and neighborhoods. Although anti-fascist politics, as shown above, have mainly to do with creating conditions of a renewed radical Left hegemony, finding ways to drive fascists outside of neighborhoods and preventing them from freely operating is a crucial challenge for the Left.

Greek society is at a crossroads. The forces of capital have made it clear that they have adopted a “no holds barred” aggressive and authoritarian tactic. The rise of Golden Dawn, regardless of how long it will last or whether it will be countered by a process of reconstruction of the Right, is already acting as a catalyst for an authoritarian political and ideological turn. No wonder that the current rising star in New Democracy is Makis Voridis, an ex far-Right militant that is combining aggressive authoritarianism with an equally aggressive neoliberalism! Therefore, the challenge for the Left is not simply to rely on electoral trends but to build an alternative hegemony. Otherwise, the danger of an even reactionary turn will remain imminent.

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