

Greece: Syriza shines a light

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Like a swan moving forward with relaxed confidence while paddling furiously beneath the surface, Syriza, the radical left coalition that could become the next government of Greece, is facing enormous challenges calmly but with intensified activity.

In the palatial setting of the Greek parliament, Alexis Tsipras, the president of the radical left coalition Syriza's parliamentary group, opens the first meeting of its 71 new deputies with his characteristic mix of cool and conviviality. At the same time, across Greece, other Syriza activists are organising neighbourhood assemblies, maintaining 'solidarity kitchens' and bazaars, working in medical social centres, protecting immigrants against attacks from Golden Dawn, the new fascist party that won 7 per cent of votes in the election, creating new Syriza currents at the base of the trade unions – and kickstarting the transition from a coalition of 12 political organisations (and 1.6 million voters) to a new kind of political party.

In the midst of all this they still find time to cook, dance, debate and organise at a three-day anti-racist festival. This annual festival, now in its 16th year, was founded with 40 organisations to 'intercept', in the words of Nicos Giannopolous, one of its driving forces, 'the growth of nationalism and racism in the early nineties'. In its aims, principles of organisation and the plural culture that it promotes, it symbolises the strength of the internationalist civil society that Syriza has both helped to build and of which it is in good part a product. Now more than 250 organisations and parties are involved in organising the event and more than 30,000 people of every age and ethnic origin pour into the still-public space of Goudi Park in Athens.

A common focus in all this activity is how to turn the electoral support for Syriza into a source of self-organised social power for change, as well as to build on it as the electoral path to government. When, on 6 May, Syriza won 17 per cent of the vote in the general election, most activists were stunned. After all, three years ago the alliance had only just scraped past the 3 per cent barrier to parliamentary seats, with 4.7 per cent. By 17 June, when the second election saw Syriza's vote rise to 27 per cent, members had begun seriously to imagine their coalition in government.

Dimitris Tsoukalas, one of Syriza's new MPs and a recruit from Pasok, the main centre-left party in Greece since its foundation in 1974, describes the vote as 'an expression of need'. Tsoukalas's recent history is indicative of the unravelling of Pasok, and with it the balance of political power in the trade unions. Formerly president of the bank workers' union, he resigned from Pasok the day after then-prime minister George Papandreou signed the troika memorandum of understanding on economic policy with the IMF, European Commission and European Central Bank. Tsoukalas then joined the 'No to the Memorandum' coalition to stand against Pasok in the regional elections for Attica – elections in which the Pasok vote first began to crumble, from 40 to 23 per cent.

Tsoukalas isn't getting carried away with Syriza's success, however. He warns that 'votes can be like sand'. The sand won't blow back to Pasok. But New Democracy, Greece's main right-wing party, which came first in the June election, was able to harvest the fruits of the fear that it and a wholly hostile commercial media stirred up at the prospect of a Syriza victory – a process that is likely to intensify. There is also the danger of an ill wind from the direction of Golden Dawn. Formed in the early 1990s as a marginal semi-legal fascist organisation, it has achieved wider electoral and street-level appeal recently in reviving an explicitly fascist tradition in a new form to lead a xenophobic, anti-immigrant response to the social devastation caused by policies of the troika.

Roots of change

As yet, though, it has been Syriza and the left that has made the most substantial gains in the wake of Greece's debt crisis. So what has produced a political organisation that is both rooted in the movements and engaged in seriously restructuring the state? What is its organisational and cultural character?

Now is not the time to analyse in definitive terms. The structures of the new party are to be discussed by members and supporters, new and old, over the coming six months or so. But it is possible, learning from its history, to sketch the personality with which it enters this new phase. And everyone I talked to in Greece insists that its fundamentals must not change.

Syriza, the Coalition of the Radical Left, was founded in 2004 following the success of a new generation of young activists from the left-wing Synaspismos party, including Alexis Tsipras and Andreas Karitzis, a key political coordinator, in taking over the party leadership. This generation had been formed through the alter-globalisation movement of the first decade of the century, and especially the massive demonstration in Genoa and then the World and European Social Forums. The experience of the social forums, including the Greek Social Forum, was decisive in turning the predominant culture of the new Greek left away from loyalty to a particular ideology in favour of pluralism, democratic collaboration, openness and a belief in the importance of proposing an alternative.

This culture grew on fertile ground. The young activists and intellectuals who helped to found Syriza were from the first generation that rejected capitalism after the fall of the Soviet Union, and who came to the left independently of any 'actually existing' alternative. Their involvement in movements and struggles was part of a process of developing an alternative rather than promoting one that had already been worked out.

They knew that governing from above wouldn't work but they did not know what would. 'We try to find another way,' says Karitzis. 'I believe you need state political power but what is also decisive is what is you are doing in the movements/society before seizing power. Eighty per cent of social change cannot come through government.'

Synaspismos provided a hospitable home for this kind of practical but principled process of creating a new kind of socialism. It was the product of a number of splits in communist politics, breaking both from Stalinism and from an accommodation with capitalism. In general, the new young leadership was welcomed by many older comrades, who had already involved Synaspismos in the alter-globalisation movement.

With their strong belief in the need for the radical left to collaborate, the young and old worked with the organisations with which Synaspismos had created the Greek Social Forum. This included other political organisations (Maoist and Trotskyist, for instance) and green, feminist, gay and social rights

networks. They all came together to form Syriza, with its green, red and purple flag. Standing outside, with arms folded, secure in its increasingly imaginary inner strength, was the KKE, the apparently immovably dogmatic Greek Communist Party. At that time it had 7.5 per cent of the vote. In this year's June election this had fallen to 4.5 per cent. (There are signs that younger activist members are looking towards Syriza, as the KKE seems to be an organisation unlikely to change.)

When, nine years and many movements later, the latest forces of change converged on Syntagma Square, Syriza members were there too. There they helped to build the movement, not to recruit to the party, to push a line or take control. Yanis Almpanis, a Syriza member active in the Network of Social and Political Rights, describes the way they participated: 'Small groups of us often came together in the square, either because we knew each other or agreed with what each other were saying.' They shared principles - for example, not allowing any anti-immigrant slogans - and applied these to find practical solutions through the general discussions. On the first day, for instance, many people came to the demonstration with Greek flags and did not allow party flags. After a few days and much argument the idea emerged of having different flags of other nations, including from the Arab Spring. 'It changed the image of the action,' says Almpanis. 'This is how to build a radical and political movement.'

It is this principled immersion in the movements, including the uprising in 2008 following the police killing of Alexandros Grigoropoulos, that led many people to decide that Syriza was the instrument they could trust to help them rid Greece of the memorandum. 'Syriza was always with us,' says Tonia Katerina from the Open City coalition. It was a sentiment I heard again and again.

When Tsipras declared that Syriza was prepared to form a government to stop the memorandum and break the old ruling order, he linked anger with hope. The parliament stands some distance back from Syntagma Square. Syriza was committing itself to open up a two-way channel of power and energy from the squares and society to parliament and back.

Politicised solidarity

In its work outside parliament, Syriza gives a high priority to supporting and spreading networks that in effect systematise the customs of informal mutual support that are deeply rooted in Greek society. Some begin with neighbours coming together to help others with greater need. Others involve solidarity kitchens linking with food producers; doctors and nurses responding to the crisis in the health system by creating medical social centres; support for actions against electricity cut-offs; legal help in courts to cut mortgage payments. Syriza's involvement in this work follows in part from its members' high alert to the threat posed by Golden Dawn. Andreas Karitzis stresses that if the left does not 'build the new social connections, someone else will'.

The fascists are already creating their own social infrastructure for Greeks only and taking direct action to drive out immigrants. On 23 June, for example, a gang of Golden Dawn thugs raided Pakistani grocers' shops in the working class suburb of Nikea, near the port of Piraeus, telling them they had one week to get ready and go, 'or else'. Syriza had won 38 per cent of the vote in Nikea (a higher vote in working class districts and among those under 35 was the general pattern of Syriza's electoral support) and after the attack the party helped to organise a rally and march of 3,000 in support of the shopkeepers.

These solidarity networks, in which Syriza is only one participant among many, are run on an explicitly self-managed democratic basis. 'We persuade people to participate, to become organisers; we explain that solidarity is an idea of taking and giving,' says Tonia Katerini.

Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras serves food at an annual anti-racist festival organised by 250 civic organisations. Photo: Aggelos Kalodoukas The networks are not a substitute for the welfare state. 'People are facing problems of survival,' explains Andreas Karitzis. 'We cannot solve these issues but we can be part of socialising them. These solidarity initiatives can be a basis for fighting for the welfare state. For example, medical staff involved in the social medical centres also fight within the hospitals for resources and free treatment. The idea is to change people's idea of what they can do - develop, with them, a sense of their capacity for power.'

In this way consolidating Syriza's vote is also about a deeper preparation for government: 'If we become the government in a few months time people will be more ready to fight for their rights, to take on the banks and so on.'

Preparation for government

Opposition as an opportunity to prepare for government also drives those Syriza members who are working closer to the state. Aristedes Baltas, coordinating member of Syriza's programme committee, describes the work already underway on the committee of MPs, experts, civil servants and civic organisations whose purpose is to shed light on (not simply 'shadow') the ministry of education and propose alternative policies. 'Through Syriza members who are frontline civil servants - and Syriza won over 50 per cent of the vote of these workers - we are mapping the obstacles, knowing who to rely on, how to release the ideas of staff with a commitment to the public good,' he says.

These committees - rather than single 'shadow ministers' - are also intended through their openness and links with social movements to be one way of countering the tendency of parliamentary institutions to pull the representatives of even the most radical political parties away from the movements for which they intend to be a political resource. Baltas, an activist-cum-professor of philosophy from the older generation of Synaspismos, the largest party in the Syriza coalition, co-ordinated the drawing up of a detailed, 400-page programme involving Syriza members and supporters from every social and political sphere. This contributed to the organisation's insistence on positive solutions and its confident approach to government. One of the programme's four sections concerned 'restructuring the state'.

Baltas summarises the approach that Syriza is now preparing to put into practice in every ministry. It is an ambitious strategy for democratising a state that is institutionally corrupt. It is also a direct challenge to the troika's claim to be modernising the Greek state through privatisation. For each ministry, Syriza committees are preparing to sweep away the bastions of corruption and open up the work of the ministry to the stifled capacities of frontline civil servants, building on and encouraging the latent honesty that Baltas is convinced generally exists amongst such public service professionals.

Under Pasok and New Democracy rule, each minister brings 40 or 50 advisors who control everything. This, Baltas says, 'is a deadly structure, suppressing all initiative and creating focal points for corruption throughout the system. We would not bring in such a layer. We will ask for a general assembly of all those who work in the ministry and explain the new situation, and encourage their initiatives to make the state responsive to the needs of the people.' The hope, he explains, is to encourage 'a surge of people wanting to participate, produce ideas. This will be the first time such a thing will have happened in Greece.'

Old challenges, new openings

Alongside these various preparations for government, inside parliament and outside, activists are alert to the dangers of losing their social roots, becoming 'another Pasok'. In the formation of the new party, a shared priority is to create, as new MP Theano Fotiou puts it, 'a structure for the people to always be connected to the party, even if they are not members of the party, to be criticising the party, bringing new experience to the party'.

One factor pulling the parliamentary representatives of radical, pro-movement parties elsewhere has been the resources bestowed on them by the state, while the party, and often the movement, loses key cadres to the parliamentary routine. Syriza will receive €8 million (almost triple its present budget) as a result of its electoral success, and each MP is allocated five members of staff by the parliament. How will Syriza's emphasis on struggles in society be applied to the distribution of these resources?

Andreas Karitzis answers: 'The biggest part of the new funds should go to what we can do in the neighbourhoods. For example, to employ people to spread initiatives like social medical centres, explain what is successful and what is not, or people who would connect people in cities with producers of agricultural stuff. And to improve the ability to build these relationships online. These are the kind of things we are discussing, as well strengthening the capacity of the party in parliament.' Out of the five staff allocated to MPs, two will work for the MP directly. One will work for a policy committee and two will be employed by the party to work in the movements and neighbourhoods.

A further challenge will arise from the fact that although there are strong women in the Syriza leadership, the overwhelming majority are men. Sissy Vovou, a member of Syriza's 200-strong leading body and member of the Syriza Women's Network, says there is a tendency to treat women's equality as 'something that should wait until we are in government'. There is a new dynamic developing though. A third of Syriza's MPs are women, who have been elected on a proportional system based on open lists. So they have been voted for on the basis of their local leadership. They made it clear at that first parliamentary meeting opened by Alexis Tsipras that women's equality cannot be put on hold.

New sources of radicalism are also evident within the trade unions. The dramatic collapse of the old political order is producing a potential earthquake in the unions, whose structures were closely tied to the old parties of Pasok, the KKE and New Democracy. The consequences for Syriza of these changes and the development of radical independent unions in Athens especially, where more than half of the population lives, are not yet clear. But they open up the possibility of a strong grassroots trade unionism that could in turn reinforce the radical character of Syriza, especially if and when it is in government.

Finally there is a challenge to us. Syriza's rise, along with the defeat of Sarkozy in France, has encouraged the rejection of austerity measures across Europe and shifted the balance of forces in the EU. But it is not enough simply to applaud and walk away. The avoidable catastrophe imposed on the Greek people worsens every day. Syriza is clear that the memorandum cannot be reversed by national resistance alone.

The most effective form of solidarity across Europe would be to learn from Syriza how to build in our own countries new kinds of political organisation that are sufficiently open and loose to enable all those people who desire an alternative to capitalism based on values that many of us describe as socialist, but without a precise model in mind, to become a powerful and popular political force.

Syriza has shown how this movement-style politics can be combined with a disciplined intervention in the political system to defend – and regain – the basic social and political rights that mainstream parties now treat as dispensable. Its example, which was necessarily forged in the heat of the most extreme manifestation of neoliberal austerity, can be taken up by the rest of us. In doing so, the political geography of Europe would be reshaped, with profound effects in Greece, potentially allowing Syriza not just to shine but to succeed.

Hilary Wainwright, 24 July 2012

P.S.

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