

Police and Anarchy in Greece

Written by Keally McBride

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/10/police-and-anarchy-in-greece/>

KEALLY MCBRIDE, OCT 10 2012

Whither the Police?

The economic crash of 2007 and subsequent austerity measures have brought years of increasing tension between the Greek police and protesters. In December 2008 (known as the “December Uprising”) a fifteen-year old boy was killed by police who were breaking up a protest in the neighborhood, Exarchia, which has frequently been the location of clashes between police and residents. In return, anarchist groups declared war upon the police force, even firebombing a police station and killing one officer.

After years of increasing tension, in February 2012 there was shift in the public statements that were offered by the police force in Greece. It seemed that the Greek police force was on the edge of joining the austerity protests they were ordered to control. In the face of continuing salary cuts, pension reform, and public discontent, the Federation of Greek Police joined the massive strikes and issued a public statements warning the Troika and the Greek leaders who have been implementing their economic policies that they would issue a warrant for their arrests:

Since you are continuing this destructive policy, we warn you that you cannot make us fight against our brothers. We refuse to stand against our parents, our brothers, our children or any citizen who protests and demands a change of policy...We warn you that as legal representatives of Greek policemen, we will issue arrest warrants for a series of legal violations... such as blackmail, covertly abolishing or eroding democracy and national sovereignty.

Then at a protest in February 2012, the Police Union chief Christos Fotopulos said:

And even more so we are fighting so that they will vote for laws so that we will penalize and arrest those people that brought this country to this situation. These handcuffs are for them, so that they are brought to justice and not for us to use tear gas against the protests of other workers. This is not the job of the police.

For a short period of time, it seemed that the Greek police were joining the ranks of other beleaguered middle and working class citizens who were fighting against austerity measures; most specifically other public employees who were organizing to save their own jobs.

However, new reports out of Greece since February suggest a very different picture. Indeed the Greek police force continues to object against the troika’s austerity measures and the government that seeks to implement them. However, rather than joining the ranks of other public employees to save their own positions, polls show that half of the Greek police force voted for Golden Dawn in the last election.

Golden Dawn is a neo-Nazi party that has found fertile grounds for growth in the ruins of the Greek economy. The *Southeast European Times* reporter Andy Dabilis explains: ‘The extremist group, which was regarded as a joke three years ago when it won only 0.29 percent in elections got 6.97 percent this year to garner 18 parliamentary seats on an anti-immigrant platform and now has the support of 10 to 12 percent of voters, polls show.’ Golden Dawn has allied itself with poorer Greek voters, distributing food in different areas of Athens where public services have broken down.

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While the fact that half of the Greek police force voted for Golden Dawn might be alarming as an indicator of political backlash and instability caused by austerity measures, it is also significant for the protection of human rights in Greece.

In July 2012, Human Rights Watch released a report, “Hate on the Streets: Xenophobic Violence in Greece,” which contains interviews with 59 people who were attacked in Greece over the past three years. Many more attacks go unreported. One of the most striking aspects of the report is the fact that police were often present during attacks or approached afterwards and refused to help the victims.

What does it mean for a country that is undergoing a serious economic crisis if the police force will no longer be agents of the rule of law? The troika should be paying more attention to these reports, and less to the budget deficits if they are truly interested in the future stability of the country. This is the most disturbing news about Greek democracy that I have read.

If domestic curbs on human rights abuses fail, in the European Union the Council of Europe has its own Commissioner for Human Rights. Nils Mouiznieks currently holds this position, and visited Athens over the summer to investigate the failure to protect human rights in Greece. “We received information that the Greek police is not doing its job in terms of racist crimes. We must thoroughly investigate any links of the Golden Dawn with police, as well as how to deal with racist violence by the police.” However an international agency supervising yet another aspect of Greek domestic arrangements will only add fuel to the fire that produced the rising popularity of Golden Dawn and the chaos on Greece’s streets. Today, some anti-fascist protesters reported that the police tortured them while in custody for several days after they protested violence against immigrants in Athens.

Those of us interested in international issues need to be more concerned with the role the police are playing—in practice, not in theory—on the streets. This week the World Bank predicted an 80% chance of continuing recession in Europe during 2013. The police force in other countries may come to play a similarly crucial role.

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