

Features and Causes of the Protests in Greece*

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In what follows we shall attempt to outline certain features of the protests in Greece and to identify their causes. It is not a comprehensive analysis and does not seek to establish final conclusions. If some of the judgments made here seem contradictory, that is no more than a reflection of Greek reality.

The Protests

The events cannot adequately be described as anything but a mass explosion, an outburst, chiefly by the young, and one that is independent of political parties and their influence. This outburst is to a great extent autonomous, using the most up to date forms of communication at national level, and with a strong element of violence in nearly every direction.

Ten days on, both the government and the political parties are either unable or reluctant to look at the events without the blinkers and stereotypes of the past and to take the initiative.

The Causes

A definitive cause is hard to identify. The spark was clearly the murder of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos, but the underlying causes are more diffuse. To summarise, they include the rage due to a sense of impotence, frustration in the face of dead ends, an aversion to the political and social system,

and an indifference towards and even hatred of the organised bodies of society.

In recent years, Greek political and economic life has been dominated by scandal and the complete impunity enjoyed by the culprits. Scandals of every kind have succeeded one another, involving ministers, parliamentary deputies, powerful business figures, the Church, the judiciary, the police and the secret services. But no one is ever punished, no one is convicted, no one goes to jail.

The Institutions

Regardless of the nature of the scandals – illegal enrichment on the part of politicians or judges, illegal transactions using Church property, bonds, Siemens's slush funds, electronic surveillance, sex scandals, the abduction and torture of immigrants, lawlessness and police brutality – public opinion and especially young people see all the central institutions of society as discredited and have reached the point at which they believe that the powers that be can act any way they like and go unpunished, that nothing can change and nothing can be solved by the existing parties, especially the two major parties that take it in turns to form the government.

This is the basis on which indifference, aversion, rage and hatred have developed, setting the scene for the violence and fury that have been unleashed in all directions.

There is now a general conviction that all those in power have got where they are by illegitimate means, and that lawlessness is prevalent and rewarded. At the same time, people live daily with the corruption, incompetence and disintegration of the public sector, which was starkly confirmed last year by the fires that raged right across Greece.

The Political Elite

The dominant political elite – what in Greece they call the ‘big houses’ – have held power for decades and the whole political system, which is dependent on this elite, benefits from it. The politicians concerned are not adversely affected by either scandals, change or disasters. The same political figures remain, regardless of whether they have contributed anything. A network of family ties, clientelism, support mechanisms, and connections with business and the mass media is in place that has not changed for decades.

In response, people resort to tax dodging, breaking the law, polluting without restraint, competing for public sector jobs and generally trying to do whatever suits them and get away with it. The government, appealing for a return to order, declared that the police would adopt a defensive stance. In other words, it effectively confessed that it could not guarantee the citizens' fundamental right to the protection of their lives and property.

The Situation of Young People

For young people in particular, the situation is intolerable. Unemployment among the under 24s exceeds 24 per cent. Universities do not produce scientists so much as unemployed persons. The education system is subject to constant change but fails to educate. Even degrees or postgraduate qualifications are not sufficient to ensure a job. One needs to know people with influence who can ‘pull strings’ on one's behalf.

All accounts of young people's attitudes these days confirm their general frustration in the face of an intolerable present and worries about the future. One 15-year-old in the first

year of lyceum (last three years of secondary school in the Greek education system, 15–18 years) writes:

How can a country, a state have a future, when the hopes and dreams of its new generation are lost and erased? How can they ask this new generation to have pride in its heritage after all this? How can we, the children of this new generation, not abandon Greece at the first opportunity? Is there anything worse a country can do to its children than to actively show them each passing day that they should not have hope? I, as a part of this new generation, feel that my wings are being clipped, that all the people in the government are sacrificing my future for their own interests and games and, finally, for their careers. I feel that the future that awaits me is violence and insecurity. Just the thought makes me want to cry in despair. I do not know how I should react and who to turn to. I am disgusted with this chaotic state of affairs. For the first time in my life I feel hatred...

What is immediately apparent from similar statements by hundreds of young people is that they are not the children of a society in which people are going hungry or which has suddenly become impoverished. They are the cries of a society which realises that its relative comfort is fragile and feels the social downscaling that is coming. It understands that the consent that it has given all these years to private enrichment and public poverty is now turning against it.

At this point we must highlight a particular trait of the Greek family, which has only now started to be affected by the crisis. Young people lack the means to become independent from their parents, in other words a good education, a decent job and policies that support them. Parents try to compensate for this by extending their protection.

For the greater part of the lower and middle social strata this amounts to spurious consumerism. However, its greatest cost is not economic or social but psychological. Adult society is effectively denying young

people the opportunity for a normal coming of age, while cultivating unrealistic expectations.

The recent events do not express a realisation of this situation, they are a symptom of it. They represent the outburst of a wounded society before the crisis. This 'youthful explosion' might be considered a forerunner of a new kind of uprising in societies like Greece. But it cannot be linked to the international crisis whose effects have not yet become acutely apparent in the daily lives of ordinary people.

Three Groups of Protesters

What is clear, however, is that this unrest has no central mastermind or organisation, party or extra-parliamentary group behind it. In general terms, those who took part can be loosely divided into three groups. The first includes the few hundred anti-establishment militants who are against any form of government or authority and always figure prominently in incidents. They were particularly prominent in the National Technical University violence, especially after the big rallies and marches. The second group is a new element. It includes the thousands of young people who have taken to the streets for the first time and have acted alongside or independently of the first group. These did not wear helmets but hoodies, bandanas and scarves and they were not limited to the district of Exarchia, but set up small groups in many Athens neighbourhoods.

They are usually young, aged 14–20, at secondary school or students, young workers or jobless. There are also some second-generation immigrants, but they do not set the tone. There are definitely links with the groups of known hooligans who cause trouble at football stadiums on Sundays.

During the daily demonstrations, new technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones were used to the utmost, with the result that there was constant communication and exchange of information between the most diverse groups that otherwise knew nothing about each other. In this way, this unique movement of demonstrations spread

with lightning speed to all major cities, especially where there are institutes of higher education.

The third group comprises those who took the opportunity to loot damaged shops, among them several drug addicts but also immigrants, most of whom were arrested. Finally, we must not omit to mention the agent provocateurs and other agents used by the police and various other agencies, who, as always, acted alongside the 'hoodies'...

The Government and the Police

The government and the police were taken by surprise and proved incapable of dealing with the intensity and extent of the destruction wrought by the enraged protesters. The government, especially, found itself trapped between the extremist elements – whose actions it has tolerated within the police force and which were responsible for the death of the 15-year-old boy – and its inability to protect the property of small and middle-sized business owners, in other words the very people that make up its electoral base.

This brings us to another peculiarly Greek circumstance. The police and the security forces in general have a chequered past. They supported the state during the Greek civil war, while they nurtured and collaborated with illegal organizations on the Right with links to the state during the years when the Right was all-powerful, after the civil war. Following that, they supported the colonels' junta. Although their leadership and personnel have changed, the mindset and certain pockets remain almost untouched.

Thus there has long been distrust towards the police, and no government since the return of democracy in 1974 has really done anything to change the relationship between the police and the public. One legacy of this situation is the public's relatively tolerant view of attacks carried out in recent years on police officers and police stations, something that is also linked to the police force's dismal human rights record.

Dozens have died in the last 15 years as a result of police violence. Between 2003 and 2007, 337 police officers were indicted for assaulting members of the public and even murder. However, only two officers were expelled from the force and there was only one conviction.

(To digress briefly, in recent years the unusual phenomenon of displays of solidarity between anti-establishment and criminal circles has emerged. Some anti-establishment activists have expressed sympathy for those they term 'social robbers'. For one famous escaped convict, in particular, there is a special sympathy in anti-establishment circles, while some individuals who seem to shift between the two groups during their time in prison are described as 'hostages of the state'. Collaboration between the two groups has also been seen in a number of bank robberies.)

The Paralysis of the Main Parties

The overriding tragedy concerning the youth unrest, however, is that the government appears not to understand that a new situation is emerging and is still talking about 'extremist elements' inciting others or 'groups striving for social upheaval', 'elements attacking democracy that must be isolated politically and socially'. It is as if the whole thing involves merely a few dozen people. The government lacks even the courage of its convictions. Its members are jostling to be included in the upcoming reshuffle, even as opinion polls already give PASOK a 4- to 5-point lead.

The main opposition party has taken a low-key approach to the unrest, in the belief that it can profit from the government's parlous situation and hoping that it will 'fall like a ripe fruit'. On PASOK's side, too, there has been no effort to analyse the phenomenon in its true dimensions.

There is 'civil war' between the two parties of the Left, KKE and SYRIZA. The dogmatic Communist Party (KKE) panicked, as always, in the face of the uncontrolled movement of young protestors and replied with its own mass – and strictly guarded – rallies, while

accusing SYRIZA of 'telling the hoodies what they wanted to hear'.

SYRIZA has tried to attract supporters from among the protesters. It categorically refuses to condemn them. At the same time, it has no concrete political proposals to offer. Thus, a new generation is being allowed to become politicised largely on the basis of the view that police stations are 'the state' and that politics can be summed up by the slogan 'police, pigs, murderers'.

Essentially, the political parties have not functioned properly or generated ideas and programmes for a long time now in Greece. For this reason, they have no substantial proposals to present to an insurgent youth. Even more, the centre-left – in other words, PASOK – and the two parties of the Left are not in a position to act as ideological and organisational 'beacons' for a youth that has been swept away by rage and despair.

A fundamental component of today's political scene are the media, which have not yet become a target for the rebels. The electronic media in particular, and especially the private media, have again proved their moral corruption and bias. They have competed fiercely in exaggerated terms to cultivate fear and a lust for violence, concealing the truth and dispensing populism.

Having never previously shown any interest in young people the media are now falling over themselves to 'give a voice' to 15-year-olds. The same people appear daily on Greek television – for which they are paid – and comment on everything, from scandals to environmental issues, new drugs and international developments. The same people are now being called upon to comment on the youth protests, based, of course, on their own commitments, political, economic, professional and even personal.

The protests took everyone by surprise, especially the rage of so many young people. It is clear that there are no specific demands or a programme. Social attitudes towards the protesters are equally contradictory. On the one hand, public opinion condemns the violence and the looting and is against the

'hoodies'; on the other hand, it sympathises with the accumulated anger of the protestors. In other words, the social framework is volatile and disappointment with the government is increasing. At the same time, this confirms that the violent protestors are not isolated and marginal elements but reflect society as a whole.

The entire political and social system appears to have failed. The young people who are protesting have no other channels of expression and representation. They despise and jeer at the political parties. The parties, in turn, address their protests merely by wheeling out their familiar 'stock phrases' and outdated analyses, or try to co-opt the demonstrators. But while these protests go beyond parties, the unorganised protesters have no means of articulating a coherent political platform of their own.

The Future Is Still Uncertain

It is to be doubted that the Greek political system will be able to take on board these new forms of protest. In any case, their causes are by their very nature resistant to incorporation by the system. Coexistence of the protests and the current system is unlikely. It will be necessary to look closely at what happens during the coming weeks – how the atmosphere in society evolves and how both the government and the opposition react.

* The article presents the opinion of the author. It therefore does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

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