

Illiberal Conservatism Comes to Greece

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When New Democracy, Greece’s conservative ruling party, won the July 2019 elections following a decade-long austerity crisis, it did so on a ticket promising tax relief, growth, law and order, and nationalism, but also on reassurances of social inclusion.

Its leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis, a Harvard-educated scion of one of Greece’s most prominent political families, promised to lead Greece out of the “stagnation” of the Syriza years, deal with the refugee crisis, assert Greece’s position on the international stage, and introduce technocratic governance following five years of “populist mismanagement.”

Due to his party’s central role in the economic disaster of the past decade, it was a tough sell. But the fact that the Syriza government had itself bowed to pressure from the troika and imposed its own round of austerity helped New Democracy’s case. With all of the mainstream media falling in line behind the campaign, the party won a clear majority.

New Democracy’s agenda always promised to be a conservative one, but in the national context of culminating crises wrought by the pandemic, the true nature of Mitsotakis’s program has been revealed as a blitzkrieg of cronyism and neoliberal shock therapy.

Pandemic Politics

Since the start of the pandemic, greatest threat facing the country has been the paltry state of Greece's public health system, a product of the troika-mandated austerity programs.

With knowledge of the health system's weakness, yet refusing to invest in strengthening it to reach basic EU standards, the Greek government opted instead for the rhetoric of national emergency. This allowed it to shut down most public activities last spring in the early stages of the pandemic. The lockdown yielded positive results; with people staying indoors, Greece's death toll during the first wave remained low compared to other European countries.

Basking in the glow of this early victory and congratulating itself while watching its approval numbers soar, the Greek government then rushed the reopening of tourism, refused to invest in public infrastructure or the health system, and neglected to plan for the second wave that was imminent. As a result, when that wave did hit, the government had only one weapon in its arsenal with which to confront it: lockdowns.

Losing Control

For more than six months now, practically all of Greece has been under strict lockdown and under curfew. Despite this, a deadly second wave mostly affecting the country's north hit in the winter, and a third wave is now ravaging Athens, home to almost half the Greek population. Vaccination numbers remain relatively low due to the disastrous handling of vaccine procurement deals by the EU. Even now, the pandemic's intensity shows no signs of abating.

But even with the lockdowns — which offer diminishing returns and feed economic and psychological anguish — the health system remains on the edge of a breakdown. ICU beds across the country are now stretched beyond capacity. According to a striking figure shared by a spokesperson for the executive pandemic expert committee, 20 percent of COVID-19-related deaths occur outside ICU clinics. At the height of the second wave in November and December last year, that figure is calculated to be close to 70 percent. Despite this, the government continues to refuse to invest in creating and staffing more ICUs, nor to force the private sector to shoulder part of the burden, claiming that it would be a waste of money.

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The economy, too, seems on the verge of collapse. Under the restrictions, bars, cafes, and restaurants have been shut since November. The tourist industry, which was contributing close to 20 percent of the country's GDP, has taken an 80 percent hit; this has meant an 8 percent decline in GDP, and a majority of workers and small business owners are facing disaster on the scale of that produced by the rounds of austerity of the last decade.

With poverty on the rise, inadequate financial support from the government, and flagrant infringement of quarantine rules by members of the administration itself — including at least twice by the prime minister — popular frustration and anger are at a high, decimating the stellar government approval numbers of April 2020.

The COVID-19 Doctrine

Politically, the response to this crisis has been a mix of nationalism, authoritarian rule, and neoliberal economic reforms — ingredients embedded in New Democracy's clientelist politics and multilayered graft, and sold at every level by the mainstream media. The result is a potent hybrid of social conservatism and right-wing economic liberalism. As the lockdowns have confined people to their homes, the government has been granted the perfect cover for a shock therapy that aims to reengineer Greece in an even more inegalitarian manner.

A slew of new legislation passed during the lockdown is set to reshape the country: protected natural areas are to be mined, the electric grid operator will be privatized, large tax offenders are to be granted amnesty. What's more, education laws reforms are set to benefit private schools to the detriment of public ones and a notorious new law will install police on campuses in an effort to intimidate and obstruct the politicization of students. As always, even more, "labor flexibility" is being legislated precisely at the same moment that real unemployment is expected to reach 20 percent amid the recession caused by the pandemic.

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The unimaginatively named Greece 2.0 program provides the framework for these reforms, utilizing €57.5 billion in investments to be funded by the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility, along with private capital, to create a neoliberal playground with new self-inflicted IMF-style "reforms," applauded by the usual suspects.

This authoritarian-cum-neoliberal *Gleichschaltung* is still in full effect, utilizing curfews, hiding in minimal press coverage, and taking advantage of parliamentary dysfunction to pass stealthily through transformative measures.

Policing Everywhere and at All Times

It is now a meme-producing cliché in Greece to say that the government believes that all problems can be solved by hiring more police officers. Indeed, in inverse relation to the shrinking number of permanent staff in the Greek health system, police numbers have grown amid the pandemic. As the official government census of public employees shows, between January 2020 and January 2021, the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection acquired 4,568 more staff, while the Ministry of Health lost 1,680 employees — possibly the only country in the world to reduce the number of its permanent health workers during the pandemic.

In neighborhoods around Athens, heavy-handed policing enforcing the lockdowns has led to a surge of protests against police brutality, which have merged with incipient movements in defense of the rule of law, as well as against neoliberal educational reforms, to create an unexpected wave of social unrest. That unrest in turn has been met with aggression from the government, which has allowed, if not directed, police officers to run riot in middle-class neighborhoods, university campuses, and the streets of downtown Athens.

Now, pent-up anger is being released, especially among the youth who, under the current conservative administration, have been targets of police violence not just during but also before the pandemic.

This concern about civil liberties has only grown since the the hunger strike of Dimitris Koufontinas in February and March, a former hitman of the urban guerrilla/terrorist group “Revolutionary Organization 17 November.” The government’s treatment of Koufontinas was seen as both vindictive and illegal, and a broad civil rights movement coalesced in his defense, unified by what it perceives as the government’s increasing disregard for the rule of law.

A Government Mired in Corruption and Scandals

As society is kept on edge, a flurry of scandals is only adding to the sense of discontent, of which we state but a few:

Imprisoned refugees are dying from preventable causes while others commit suicide in hellish camps that lack the basics for a bare minimum of decency. Others are being illegally pushed back in the middle of the Aegean in what looks to be now standard procedure for the Greek coast guard, according to humanitarian NGOs.

Mitsotakis’s hand-picked director of the National Theatre, Dimitris Lignadis, is in jail, accused of serial molestation of minors and sexual attacks.

A continuous stream of direct awards of government contracts in questionable circumstances taking full advantage of the pandemic emergency laws are surfacing, one after the other.

Several New Democracy officials were caught jumping the queue to be vaccinated before their legal turn.

A photojournalist for the opposition newspaper *Documento* was detained by police when he tried to photograph the numerous police officers that were on permanent duty guarding Menios Fourthiotis, a convicted fraudster and minor TV presenter, as well as a very pro-government newspaper publisher and media manager. Apparently provided with a taxpayer-funded armored vehicle and a guard of fourteen policemen, he seemed to be enjoying protection from politicians and businessmen at the highest levels. The guards were recalled only when the scandal surfaced.

One of the reporters who researched aspects of both the Lignadis and the Fourthiotis scandal was the late Giorgos Karaivaz, a crime and police reporter for a private national TV station who was shot and killed in cold blood outside his house a few days ago. Karaivaz had filed extensive reports on the Mafia wars in Athens and written about the links between organized crime, big business, and politicians. His death has created consternation across Europe regarding the rule of law, and questions regarding the quality of democracy.

The Emergence of a New Right

To put things in a broader European context, the Mitsotakis government is positioned somewhere between the neoliberal authoritarianism of Emmanuel Macron in France, and the illiberal democracy of Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Macron and Orbán, both of whom took advantage of the pandemic to introduce unpopular, authoritarian measures, including the expansion of policing, as well as police protection. But instead of competing with hardline nationalists and conservatives as most right and center-right parties do in Europe, Kyriakos Mitsotakis is incorporating them.



Kyriakos Mitsotakis speaking at a press conference at the end of the European Council Summit in Brussels, 2019. (Nicolas Economou / NurPhoto)

In fact, New Democracy is unique among the right-wing European People's Party members, having *organizationally* embraced the far right. It has placed in key roles cadres of the far-right populists LAOS, the party that opened the way for the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, shunned by all democratic parties in the period between 2000 and 2011. LAOS was vehemently xenophobic and anti-Semitic, had ties to a shady ultranationalist underworld, and was disparaged as such by the center-right.

The ultranationalist furor that New Democracy joined and stirred up during the Prespes agreement on the issue of the recognition of Northern Macedonia and the radically anti-refugee policy and messaging that became an essential part of the party's political identity are evidence of this shift.

The Greek experience suggests that faced with economic hardship, the widespread popular resentment of elites leads to social atavism that is perceived as oppositional to the values of the neoliberal elites — leading to such monstrosities as Golden Dawn. But as soon as some sort of precarious “normality” reemerges, it also leads to retrenchment, and thus to the new kind of illiberalism that New Democracy represents.

In this context, the rhetoric of an internal or external adversary — be it the refugees that flooded Greece's northern borders last January, the youth, students, or the Left — has now been followed by an individualistic narrative of “personal responsibility” and economic winners and losers — despite the government's gross irresponsibility in protecting its citizens.

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Minister of the Interior Makis Voridis, himself a high profile transfer from LAOS — and with a very radical personal history — was clear in this respect when he warned in 2018 that New Democracy's mission was to “intervene in the state and the institutions so that the left never returns to power because its ideas are defective.” This radicalized and militant New Democracy has found ample space to express its authoritarian inclinations under the state of exception that the pandemic has ushered in, backed by the comically unanimous and unprincipled support of all of the oligarch-owned media.

As the health crisis continues to escalate in a context of illiberal conservatism, popular resistance is beginning to surface — but it is still weak. Indeed, to preemptively discourage this resistance, the government responded to the first signs of unrest with incommensurate violence.

As of mid-April the government, under the threat of an economic meltdown, seems to have given up in trying to contain the pandemic. A lockdown is in effect but is no longer policed. High schools reopened and tourism has been planned to open in early May, while a timeline for removing restrictions on movement has been announced.

This is happening while cases and hospital intubations are at a record high and the daily death toll is now above the EU average. As rumors of an early election circulate, and though police have been somewhat reined in, one should be skeptical of accounts that see an exit from this neoliberal gloom without some sort of social mobilization. In the past decade, the Greek left, in its various guises, has managed to channel the energy of social unrest to achieve substantial, if temporary, victories. In current conditions, it must strive for more.