

Defeat and recomposition: thoughts on the Greek election

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Panagiotis Sotiris

1. The general election of July 7 in Greece represents a major defeat for the subaltern classes in Greece, but also for the radical left. However, it would be wrong to assume that defeat was something that occurred on the day of the election. Rather, this is the result of a series of defeats, going back to the summer of 2015, and an expression of the strategic crisis of the Greek radical left and its inability to articulate a coherent strategy to take advantage of a unique conjuncture of hegemonic crisis in the 2010-2015 period. Moreover, the Greek election offers an opportunity to rethink the disastrous effects of the combination of 'left Europeanism' and of a reformist parliamentary approach to governance. As such, it offers important lessons for the radical left internationally.

2. After 4.5 years in government, during which it capitulated to the EU-IMF-ECB 'Troika', disregarded the tremendous popular determination in the 2015 referendum and implemented neoliberal policies, SYRIZA lost the election. The aggressive character of these policies, the failure to significantly improve living conditions and the increasing manifestations of political cynicism (exemplified in the handling of the 2018 deadly forest fires), all contributed to this defeat, despite the attempt of the SYRIZA leadership to invest electorally on the fear for a return of the Greek right, which can perhaps explain a last minute swing of voters that can explain why SYRIZA still managed to get 31.5%.

3. New Democracy returns to power, with an absolute majority of 158 members of Parliament, and a very aggressive program that combines neoliberalism with a strong authoritarian emphasis on 'law and order', calling for more authoritarian treatment of demonstrations and squats. One of the first measures it has announced is the revocation of the so called 'university asylum', namely the interdiction on police forces to enter university premises without prior permit from university authorities. The new government is dominated by figures well-known for their connection to big business and for the embracing of the Memoranda policies as strategically necessary. Moreover, New Democracy will benefit from its increased control over the State, since it also recently won 12 out the 13 regional elections.

4. With New Democracy at 39.8% and SYRIZA at 31.5% we enter again a period where two parties dominate the political scene around a centre-right/centre-left cleavage, with SYRIZA taking the place formerly occupied by PASOK. Moreover, SYRIZA who has moved significantly to the right, with Alexis Tsipras suggesting that it is an expression of a 'Progressive Alliance' and leaving aside the 'radical left' rhetoric, is consciously trying to play the part of social-democracy in Greece, taking advantage of the fact that KINAL

(Movement of Change, the new name of PASOK) took only 8.1%. Tsipras has openly called for a 'transformation' of SYRIZA into a broad party in an attempt to even distance it from symbolic references to left wing radicalism.

5. At the same time abstention was still at very high level at 42%, an indication of a broader crisis of legitimization of the Greek political system, something that suggest that important segments of the electorate still feel alienated to the political scene. Although, this does not necessarily represent a 'protest vote', it still points towards a persisting political crisis.

6. Despite the right wing transformation of SYRIZA and the discontent expressed towards the neoliberal policies it promoted, there has not been a major swing of voters towards radical left formations. ANTARSYA, the coalition of the anticapitalist left, took only 0.41% of the vote and Popular Unity suffered another humiliating electoral defeat, taking only 0.28%. Even the Communist Party of Greece took only 5.3% despite running a very intense campaign. The only formation to benefit from a left-wing protest vote against SYRIZA has been MéRA25, the party led by Yanis Varoufakis, minister of Finance in the first Tsipras government. However, MéRA25 is not a radical left party and its political line is the fantasy of an 'alternative europeanism', that has been the trademark of Varoufakis who always talks about 'saving Europe from itself' and refuses to take a clear position against the Euro. It is impossible to think of this formation as a potential vehicle for the radical left.

7. The only positive development of the election was the electoral failure of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party, who obtained 2.93% of the vote and did not manage to elect anyone to parliament. This comes at a crucial point in the big trial of Golden Dawn where the leadership is accused of being a criminal organization responsible, among other crimes, for the murder of Pavlos Fyssas in 2013. However, another far right formation, the "Greek Solution", that insists that it is not 'fascist', did manage to enter parliament after obtaining 3.7%.

8. Officially, the Greek bail-out program (the 'Memoranda') ended on August 2018, but Greece still under 'enhanced surveillance' by the European 'institutions'. In reality, not much has changed in terms of reduced sovereignty, since Greece is obliged to have increased primary budget surpluses, to keep in place the neoliberal reforms introduced in the Memoranda period, and to still negotiate major policy directions with the representatives of the 'institutions'. As a result of the commitment to austerity, Greece's growth has been anemic and the decrease in unemployment (which still very high at almost 18%) was mainly due to an increase of part-time and precarious jobs. There has been a wave of privatizations (such as regional airports and the national railways), but as part of the agreement with the EU there are more underway, and the new government has pledged itself to promoting 'investment', accusing the legislation regarding protection of the environment and of cultural heritage as an obstacle to 'growth'.

9. The election of 2019 marks the end of an historical cycle of intense economic but also political crisis. This cycle opened up with the combination of the global capitalist crisis with the crisis of the Greek 'developmental paradigm', which was based upon Greece's participation in the Eurozone, increased public borrowing, overpriced public works and debt-fuelled consumption. It also opened up with the big rebellion of the Greek youth on December 2008, a social explosion without precedent that proved to be 'a postcard from the future'. This was followed by the Greek sovereign debt crisis and the imposition of the Memoranda by the 'EU-IMF-ECB' Troika, which led to a social and political crisis that in the 2010-2012 period took the almost insurrectionary dimensions, with general strikes, the 2011 'Movement of the Squares' and many forms of mass protest. This led to tectonic shifts in relations of political representation and the electoral rise of SYRIZA, which became the main party of opposition in the 2012 election and won the January 2015 election. However, SYRIZA had no real preparation for a confrontation with the EU and despite the expressed will of the popular majority to reject austerity in the 2015 referendum, accepted the third memorandum and fully implemented it. As a result, it was a party supposedly of the Left that accepted the neoliberal logic of 'TINA' [There Is No Alternative] and this had demoralizing effects upon social movements.

10. However, the forces to the left of SYRIZA failed to offer an alternative. The Communist Party (KKE) continued upon a political line that combined rhetorical anticapitalism with a sectarian tactic in social movements and a general line that insisted upon 'the situation not being ripe enough for social change'. ANTARSYA failed at the peak of the crisis to contribute adequately to the formation of a political alternative strategy for the break with austerity and the exit from the Eurozone and the EU, leaving the terrain to SYRIZA and its reformist pro-EU line. At the summer of 2015, after the capitulation of SYRIZA, the necessary cooperation between ANTARSYA and Popular Unity (who had just left SYRIZA) was not achieved, enabling SYRIZA to win the September 2015 elections.

11. The period after 2015 was also a period of strategic crisis of the Greek radical left. Popular Unity failed to become the necessary process of self-critique and recomposition of the radical left. In contrast, the leadership of Popular Unity opted for a traditional bureaucratic conception of running the front, combined with traditional reformist economism and a constant rhetorical denunciation of SYRIZA based on the mistaken assumption that the Tsipras would soon fall. Political energy was wasted in attempts to maintain a media presence and not on work on strategy or on building new movements. On top of this, the nationalist position regarding the Macedonia question from the majority of Popular Unity and Lafazanis' open flirting with the idea of a 'patriotic front' just made things worse.

12. On the other hand ANTARSYA also opted for a sectarian tactic and a refusal to face the strategic challenges. The majority of ANTARSYA basically treated Popular Unity as the new SYRIZA and there a conscious attempt to undermine process of unity. At the same time, strategic thinking was replaced by an obsessive anticapitalist rhetoric which could not compensate for the lack of any confrontation with what constitutes revolutionary

strategy today. Moreover, this sectarianism took various expressions also within social movements, contributing to the further fragmentation of the political landscape of the Greek radical left.

13. In contrast to an appearance of 'relative stability', which is mainly due to the absence of strong movements in the past years and the return of New Democracy to power, the situation in Greece is far from stable. The Greek economy has not recovered and with the European economy slowing down it could enter a new recession. The problem of debt has not been solved and social conditions have not improved significantly. Unemployment is high, wages are still very low, precariousness is on the rise, and public services are under attack. This is not due only to the inherent contradictions of Greek capitalism but also to the very functioning of the Eurozone and the European Union which has austerity and neoliberalism inscribed in its very institutional logic. In this sense, the dynamics of social and political crisis are still active, yet to see their full manifestation would require overcoming the disaggregating effects of the post-2015 conjuncture upon the subaltern classes and their determination to struggle.

14. Although the dominant forces insist that Greece's relation to the EU has returned to a 'new normality' it is still impossible to have any kind of social transformation and emancipation, not even any kind of real 'progressive reform', within the political, economic and monetary architecture of the Eurozone and the EU, with its embedded neoliberalism and erosion of popular sovereignty. A rupture with the EU would not be a 'nationalist' option, but a class policy that represents the subaltern classes against the forces of capital that insist upon the 'European Road'. It is by now evident that it is impossible to transform the European Union 'from the inside'. In this sense, simply thinking of a return to 'anti-austerity struggles', however necessary and urgent these are, without any reference to the necessary rupture with the Eurozone and the EU, misses an crucial aspect of social and political antagonism in the current Greek conjuncture.

15. Such a political orientation needs to be based upon a return of mass movements, starting with the effort to rebuild a labour movement in deep crisis, by means of grassroots initiatives to organize the majority of the employees of the private sector that have no trade union representation and by attempting, but also with working towards a new youth movement, with the attempt to mount resistances at the local level, and with the need for a broad movement against the persistent forms of sexism and patriarchy in Greek society.

16. To transform demands and struggles into a coherent hegemonic strategy requires the elaboration of a transition program, with both the technical but also the necessary social aspects of a 'roadmap for the exit from the Eurozone and the EU', as a struggle not only to regain monetary sovereignty and control over economic policy, but also to initiate processes of social transformation in a socialist horizon, processes which are the necessary conditions of any strategy to rupture to succeed.

17. It also requires rebuilding the radical left. With SYRIZA becoming a systemic political force and a 'party of governance' there is no point in treating it as a 'force of the left'. Any process of recomposition of the radical left should be antagonistic to SYRIZA. What is required is reopening a political process for the recomposition of a new radical and anticapitalist left. In certain way, and despite the different histories (and problems), both ANTARSYA and Popular Unity seem to have reached a point that can only be described as 'end of the road', at least as political venues for the recomposition of a radical anticapitalist left that could stand up to the challenge. What is needed is a new thinking and a new practice in regards to radical left united front, not just as an agreement or cooperation between organizations, but as the formation of an open political process, a laboratory of strategy and new forms of political intellectuality, and a means to have not just a political program, but a project for hegemony and transformation.

18. This process would require not only self-criticism but also a profound rethinking of strategies, discourses and modes of organizing, along with extended experimentation and forms of bringing together militant theory and social movements. It is not going to be easy, and it might take time. In a certain way it is about actually learning from defeat.

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