

GREECE IN 2009: BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

By

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The first public opinion poll that was published by a Greek national daily on 01/01/2009 discovered that nearly 60 percent of those queried expects the Greek economy to founder in the next several months. At the same time, only about 25 percent accepts “personal sacrifice” as a way of correcting the crisis, when more than 50 percent says Greece will suffer recurring riots like those that rocked the country during December 2008. In short, the poll findings highlight the peculiar dead end Greece faces: there is a crisis, its people admit, but few individual citizens would be prepared to roll up their sleeves and put their shoulder to the wheel to clear the obstacle.

One could argue, with some merit, that Greeks aren’t unique in their dislike of the idea of pain and effort to correct a rapidly deteriorating situation. Yet, a closer examination of “majority attitudes,” especially in the wake of the most devastating civil unrest the country witnessed since the end of World War II, uncovers some disturbing trends not usually met in developed Western polities to which Greece insists it belongs.

Prominent among them is public “tolerance” of mass protest. Foreign correspondents covering the December riots appeared dumbfounded by the lack of popular backlash in the face of massive destruction of property and extreme violence, not to mention rampant looting. Few outsiders saw, or approved of, the “logic” behind the Greek government’s apparent strategic decision to allow throngs of rampaging protesters impose a state of complete anarchy in the heart of the Greek capital and other Greek cities practically **unopposed by the police**. When threatened shop owners in Patras and elsewhere got onto the streets themselves to chase away the firebomb-throwing teenagers, armed with whatever they could lay their hands on, Greek media “opinion makers” moaned at the risk of injury the “rebellious children” faced -- and had no words of sympathy for the **real victims of the wanton violence whatsoever**. Again, foreign correspondents looked on in amazement.

Another disturbing attitude that became abundantly prominent during the riots is the tendency of the majority to “understand” blind violence, irrespective of scale, as a *legitimate form of protest*. This is not new of course. Athens has been open field for non-stop, low-level anarchist activity for decades, with unknown groups of midnight arsonists roaming in various parts of town to torch cars, bank ATMs, and business establishments without the police being able to arrest any of them, ever. Greek authorities resent the description of this well-established activity as “terrorism,” arguing that it constitutes rather “common crime.” In either case, the absence of determined action against the arson gangs makes Greek law enforcement look inept and irrelevant and Greek governments placid and fearful.

Years of “progressive” politicking and misconstruing the essence of democracy have led the majority to obtain a frame of mind that could be best described as “passive.” Successive governments have not disturbed this trend for obvious electoral reasons. Only very recently, for example, the Athens Olympic Games were widely exploited by partisan propaganda to “prove” how “strong” Greece was -- only for the edifice of “strength” to crack and disintegrate within a few short years after the closing Olympic bell under the combined avalanche of crushing budget deficits (including €15 billion to stage the Olympics), external debt, shaky foreign relations, and the invasion by illegal immigrants. “Strong” Greece today is one breath away from coming under the tutelage of the International Monetary Fund as former prime minister Constantine Mitsotakis recently implied causing a stir.

The immediate future holds no promises of desperately needed initiative. Greece has been shocked by the riots. But the shock has not apparently served as the incentive to mobilize in a proactive direction. As politicians spar and charge windmills at full gallop, overwhelming economic and social problems are left to fester. It seems that the Greek political “system” -- the one that has so successfully nurtured catastrophic illusions since the fall of the junta -- has now reached a stage where posturing for “progress” won’t provide the temporary outlet that has served Greek political parties at the ballot box. The chips are down.