

After the election of Syriza in Greece — Power is not in Parliament

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Across Europe, the left is excited by Syriza topping the polls in the Greek election. Some on the left have gone so far as to suggest the election itself will mark the end of austerity policies, in the terminology of the Anglo left, an end to the idea that There Is No Alternative (TINA). Another indication that something of significance is happening is that ahead of the election a new wave of capital flight has started from Greece with an estimated 8 billion transferred out of the country over the last few weeks.

From an anarchist, non electoralist perspective we might hope that Syriza's election represents the high water mark of the swing to electoralism that came out of the defeat of mass resistance to the imposition of the crisis. That won't be today or tomorrow, it will take a period of weeks for Syriza to have been in power long enough to demonstrate that the problem with the old electoral left was not reducible to corrupt social democrats and lying politicians. Rather it is in the nature of the electoral system, a system that takes in young idealist transformers and spits out older, corrupt defenders of the status quo. A process we have seen recently in Ireland with both the previous Green Party and current Labour Party governments.

Both those governments came to power after the politicians who comprised them had been house trained. This is certainly not the case with Syriza, a party that like Podemos in the Spanish state are defined by their youthful idealism and determination to smash the mold of pragmatic politics and business as usual. But corruption and pragmatism are the symptoms of failure to win fundamental change and not the cause. Along with the belief that the change that was not possible now, will be possible in the future, if only power can be retained. The cost of relearning that lesson, so soon forgotten after Allende and Mitterrand may be paid in blood in Greece depending on how the conflict between Syriza in power and the rest of the Greek state develops.

Why so glum?

But lets take a step back and explain our pessimistic outlook. First off the quick simple explanation. Power does not lie solely or even principally in parliament and never has. Rather the decisions that parliamentarians can make are tightly constrained by two forces. The first 'soft' force is the invisible hand of the market. Governments that make or even look likely to make decisions 'the market' won't like will face huge amounts of funds leaving the country, a capital strike that removes the ability to pay for reforms. The second 'hard' force is that of the military and secret state. The state is never simply controlled by the elected executive in any country. In Greece in particular there is resistance both from the civil service and from the military. In addition the secret state in the form of large sections of the police will resist the democratic will expressed in the election today just as it has battered and gassed the movement on the streets again and again over the last years.

In 1981 the first of these, the 'soft' force of the market was enough over two years to erode and reverse the policies of the left government elected under Mitterrand in France. This despite the inclusion of four Communist Party ministers in the Cabinet. In Chile in 1973 the second 'hard' force was deployed when the, the military and secret state overthrew the Allende government in a coup, murdered the president and thousands of other leftists and instituted years of military dictatorship.

The faith of Syriza in power will be one of those paths, either soft market terrorism forcing the abandonment of election promises or, if that fails, a coup removing Syriza from office. This

is inevitable unless Syriza transforms the politics it intends to implement into something more acceptable to the EU, the military and the secret state. Syriza itself seems to think it can win a game of chicken with the ECB, but this doesn't seem to be taken seriously by many outside the parties ranks although its impossible to rule out altogether some face saving compromise being stitched up. I don't intend to discuss beyond this the details of what sort of deals with the Troika may or may not be possible, the internet is awash with opinions on that question.

If that were to happen Syriza will end up looking more like PASOK (the older socialist party that was in government) but without, for now, the corruption that came to define it. In that case Syriza becomes the shepherd for capitalism that carefully herds the explosion of street and workplace level social organisations that has emerged into the safe field of a renegotiated austerity. This will almost certainly look reasonable as a protection against the soft and hard wolves at the gate.

Indeed if that is the path taken the same leftists who are now uncritically proclaiming the Syriza election is in itself the end of TINA will in a couple of months be defending Syriza's action on the grounds that given the forces arrayed against them There Is No Alternative.

Some necessary expansions & explanations

The summary above assumes a fair bit of knowledge, if you know what is referred to it the examples make sense, if not it's a string of assertions. So below I break down those brief references into longer explanations.

This is probably particularly relevant for readers in Ireland where the southern state has mostly tried rule through consent and populism. Here the failure to implement promises is generally read simply as an indication that politicians are lying. The connections of the 1% with politicians to make their wealth possible is seen as a product of corruption. Most successfully – in state terms – most police are unarmed and seen as primarily concerned with criminality rather than political control. That's unusual in Europe where many demonstrations are accompanied by if not broken up by obviously political riot police.

Because this is not how the Garda are generally viewed in the Irish republic this has meant the use of widespread police action against communities has arrived as a considerable shock for most of the population. The level of that shock is demonstrated by the widespread belief that simply reminding the Garda of the oath they take will be enough to correct their behaviour. So when we look to these international examples it's perhaps easier to understand the forces at work beneath the surface.

Capital flight

When the left talks about capital it primarily means stocks, shares and bonds. Modern capitalism has developed so that technology on the one hand and the rules laid down by global institutions like the World Trade Organisation on the other, make the transfer of funds for the super rich (the top 0.01%) from country to country possible at a keystroke. When the government of Cyprus tried to pay for its banking crisis through seizing funds, the super rich largely managed to transfer its wealth out leaving the small saver carrying the costs.

It's somewhat more complex for the rest of the 1% but even so it's not that complicated or long a process to liquidate investments in one country and transfer them to another. The start of a financial crisis is often when that top 1% panics and starts to transfer its wealth out of a country.

Often that's ahead of the fear of a banking collapse. Indeed the huge transfers of wealth generated by the fear of collapse can then ensure the collapse, the threat of that panicked the Irish government into the bank guarantee. But capital flight can also occur because of a concern that the election of a new government will be less favourable to the rich; It will certainly occur if — horror of horrors — a new government intends to attempt a wealth transfer from the rich to the rest of society. Capital flight removes the wealth that might have made such transfers possible as well as forcing a reversal of such policies. Established political parties know this — it's an unstated limit on what policies can be passed that, because it's unstated, it's often invisible to the general public. But let's look at an example.

1981 Mitterrand government

In 1981 for the 1st time in the 5th Republic a socialist, François Mitterrand became the president of France. He was elected on a radical left program with the Communist Party as coalition partners. This wasn't hot air, policies and initial achievements included a 15% raise in the minimum wage, a minimum of 5 weeks holidays, a maximum 39 hour week and increased social welfare including a 64–81% increase in state pensions and a 44–81% increase in childrens' allowance. This was to be paid for through a tax on wealth and to involve nationalisations of key industries. A lot of repressive legislation was also abolished, including the death penalty and limits were placed on police powers to stop and search.

The 1% responded by transferring wealth out of France, a process that in 1981 was much slower and more complex but which within two years brought Mitterrand to heel. By March of 1983 Mitterrand was forced to announce an 'austerity turn' and reverse some of what had been given. Despite this he was re-elected but during that second term the gap between rich and poor increased and unemployment and poverty rose as the economy went into recession. By the time he left power he was seen by many as yet another corrupt lying politician in a long line.

The Greek military and secret state

As recently as 1974 Greece was ruled by a military dictatorship, one that was only overthrown due to mass struggle. In April 1967 a military coup saw tanks in the centre of Athens while military units arrested left organisers, activists and politicians, some 10,000 were arrested in all. Much of this was the work of the Military police, whose director later said "Within twenty minutes every politician, every man, every anarchist who was listed could be rounded up...It was a simple, diabolical plan" In the years that followed an estimated 3,500 people were tortured.

Militant resistance, including rioting, is relatively acceptable with a large segment of the Greek population because of the memory of those times and the struggle that brought an end to the dictatorship. The military was never really purged or reduced so that today in terms of population and GNP it remains one of the best funded militaries in Europe. Alongside this, there is a

considerable 'secret state', one aspect of which, that has come to light in the last couple of years is the very considerable overlap between membership of the neo fascist Golden Dawn party and the police. The extent to which either the military or the police forces would follow instructions from a radical left government is questionable at best. The 1967 Greek coup showed the possible human costs of a coup, so to did the coup in Chile in 1973.

Chile and Allende

In November 1970 the radical Marxist Salvador Allende was elected president of Chile, another country with an overblown military and substantial secret state. In power he started to implement what was called The Chilean Path to Socialism. Because of the relative poverty of Chile it was in some respects was more modest than Mitterand's 1981 program in France but did involve large scale nationalisations, poverty relief, social welfare programs and other measures. The impact is shown by the 28% increase in purchasing power that occurred for most people in the first 9 months in power.

The rules of global finance and the technology available meant that although capital flight happened it did not have the power it had a decade later in France. And the nature of Chilean capital meant that some of it could not be easily transferred. It is not possible, for instance, to move a copper mine to another country and copper mining was a huge part of the economy. Copper still provides 20% of GDP and 60% of exports. All the same capital flight and the other methods of economic terrorism of the ruling elite pushed the economy into recession and saw foreign reserves decline. Despite this Allende's government pushed on with its reforms.

June 1973 saw the first failed coup attempt. Allende felt unable to use the Carabineros (national police) as the influence of the secret state meant he suspected they were not loyal to his government. The modern revolutionary left sometimes presents the story as if the Chilean left foolishly wandered into the coup that was coming but in fact they were aware of the dangers and sections of the left were arming themselves in preparation.

On the 11th September 1973 Augusto Pinochet, the head of the armed forces launched a coup that was backed and at least in part organised by the CIA. Jet fighters attacked the palace, a level of force lightly armed workers militia's have no answer to then or indeed now.

Allende went on radio one last time to say "Workers of my country, I have faith in Chile and its destiny. Other men will overcome this dark and bitter moment when treason seeks to prevail. Keep in mind that, much sooner than later, the great avenues will again be opened through which will pass free men to construct a better society. Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers!" Allende died shortly afterwards holding the AK47 Fidel Castro had given him, either at his own hands or at those of the military.

The military rounded up tens of thousands of union and community activists and members of left organisations, tortured many and murdered at least 3000. Thousands fled into exile and for 17 years a military junta ruled the country. Over this time the military continued to arrest, torture and in many cases disappear activists, some being murdered by being thrown from helicopters into the ocean so their bodies would never be found.

Back to Greece

The Greek economy has already been destroyed by the years of austerity, the impact has been compared to the Great Depression of the 1930s.. There is 60% youth unemployment and there has been a 30% drop in real incomes. Ahead of the election there has already been significant capital flight, but in any case the Greek banks are already depended on ECB funds in order to remain open. Even a modest move by Syriza to implement its program after the election will be read by the ECB as a breach of the conditions under which this support is given and if it is withdrawn a widespread banking collapse is likely, indeed perhaps inevitable.

A coup seems almost unthinkable to the population of the EU but if it comes to that it probably won't be as crude as the Allende coup in Chile. Rather we are likely to see the neo-fascist Golden Dawn used to bring chaos to the Greek streets, the police simply standing by and then as the killings and destruction mount, the army stepping in to restore stability and 'save democracy'. Which will of course start with a period under a caretaker government acceptable to the 1% before fresh elections. We can be sure that in terms of the EU secret state the plans for such an eventuality are already in place.

But lets be clear. We are not saying Syriza are unaware of these dangers. The older members after all, would include those who fought the previous military dictatorships. Many of the younger members coming from the anti-austerity protests of 2009 will have experienced the secret state, in the form of the riot police, first hand. Others will have already encountered Golden Dawn and all cannot help but be aware of the links between Golden Dawn and the police. Even Pablo Iglesias, the leader of the Spanish equivalent, Podemos covered many of the themes we have touched on here, including Chile, in his Winning Elections does not Mean Winning Power speech as a Syriza rally early this month.

Times are desperate and we can presume that the Syriza strategy is in part based on desperate measure for desperate times, in part on hoping to give some space for the social movements at the base of Greek society to further grow and solidify and unfortunately in part on illusions in EU democracy and the ability of the left in the EU to come to the rescue.

In any case the vote is underway, by tomorrow the result will be known and the die will be cast.

Why write?

Our purpose here is not to convince those on the ground in Greece of anything – apart from the foolish self importance of such a goal, we don't have that many Greek readers, and the hour has passed. Rather we want to prepare our readers in Ireland and elsewhere for what is to come.

Let us again be clear; We are not electoralists but we are willing to mobilise to defend the right of a Syriza government to deliver on the promises that have brought it to power. In the soft form that will mean protesting against the attempts by the ECB (and the 1%) to force Syriza to roll back on its policies through soft economic terrorism. And in the hard form it may mean being willing to mobilise against any form of coup by the Greek secret state and the military.

It is not necessary to believe Syriza has taken the best road in order for us to take this stance. It is clear that what will be key is what happens on the streets and in the workplaces in Greece. There is a fear that so much effort has gone into the election that the social movements have in effect been partially demobilised. But after the elections they will be needed to demand the implementation of what has been promised and to mobilise not only against the financial and military threats but also to demand solidarity from elsewhere in Europe.

What it will mean

In making these predictions if it turns out that Syriza takes the other route and fails to implement the policies it is coming to power under we hope you will understand that corruption and lying politicians will only be a partial answer. Syriza is both a young party in the sense it has only existed for a few years and in the sense that many of its activists are young, or at least only recently politicised. If those who make up its ranks wanted power above all else they would surely have joined another party years ago, probably PASOK.

The rise of Syriza is so recent that there can be very few who are in the leadership simply out of a desire for power. Which will make the real reasons for any retreat from their promises very clear, the nature of the electoralist system itself and how it connects and is controlled by the interests of the 1%. The discovery, when faced with the threat of capital flight on the one hand and military coup on the other, is that within the rules of the electoralist game There Is No Alternative after all.

From tomorrow one of those two stories will start to be told. One might be the discipline of the market bringing Syriza into line, the second less likely one, (only less likely because capital flight and ECB action will be enough) may be the build up to a coup. It probably will not be clear for some time which of them it is. Either way our solidarity goes to the Greek movement in the streets, to those fighting austerity and especially to those also fighting racism and the rise of the far right. We intend to watch, mobilise and learn because in your fight we see our fight.

The only thing that seems certain is that after tomorrow we will need to see you in the streets.

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