

Outlawing Golden Dawn: Dealing with Right-Wing Extremism in Greece

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After a high-profile trial that lasted over five years, a Greek court ordered Golden Dawn's leader Nikolaos Michaloliakos and many former members of the party to begin serving their prison sentences in October 2020. This was the biggest trial of Nazis since Nuremberg; it not only marked the end of Golden Dawn's criminal activities in Greece, but also forced the party to close many of its headquarters across the country. Amongst others, Golden Dawn members have been involved in serious crimes, including murder, attacks on refugees, extortion and racketeering. The trial's completion was celebrated by many Greeks, who perceive the party as a "paradox" in politics. How can a country, that suffered tremendously under Nazi occupation during World War II, vote for politicians who openly embrace such symbolism and ideology? Some researchers seem to think there is evidence of a "dictatorship nostalgia" in Greek society, especially in rural areas, which was amplified by the negative effects of the fiscal crisis. Others even believe that Golden Dawn might return in the future, as some of their remnants are committed to spreading the leadership's ideology. One thing is certain: Golden Dawn's extremism fractured Greece's political system and almost a year after the trial, the country is still healing from a decade of violence, hatred and fear.

The Fiscal Crisis and Golden Dawn's Rise

Before explaining Golden Dawn's rise in Greek politics, it is important to briefly look at the macroeco-

omic effects of the fiscal crisis, which deeply affected the working class. The country almost went bankrupt in 2010. To save the Greek State from total collapse, the first economic adjustment programme was signed between the government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the same year. The bailout introduced sweeping changes, cuts and public sector reforms. Early figures from the Hellenic Statistical Authority showed that the unemployment rate doubled in less than two years (2009-2011), rising from 9.62% to 17.87%. With Greece's GDP growth rate declining sharply and the debt skyrocketing, austerity was the government's last card. Most of those reforms and cuts were not received well by Greeks, who saw the programme as an attempt by the government to proceed with mass layoffs.

Consequently, political turmoil and the simultaneous decline of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement of Greece (PASOK) led to an era of dealignment in Greek politics. Coalitions were formed, while new parties surfaced and competed for seats in the Parliament in the 2012 general election – the first one in the austerity years. Up until that point, the name "Golden Dawn" was unknown to the public, and despite its existence as a political party for more than two decades, its ideology was a well-kept secret. Only anti-fascist groups were aware of its ties to neo-Nazism. This uncertainty gave Golden Dawn's candidates clout and allowed them to appear on mainstream media to normalize their rhetoric. In June 2012, Golden Dawn emerged as one of the biggest winners of that election, and a few years later rose to third position in Parliament with almost 7% of the vote. The distrust in both Greek and European elites and their strong anti-migrant stance helped Golden Dawn gain significant momentum. Whilst the overall popularity of right-wing parties was shrinking, the party's self-portrayal as the "only nationalist choice"

allowed them to attract voters from other right-wing parties. Golden Dawn even absorbed voters from the centre-right New Democracy, which at the time was going through an identity crisis.

From 2012 until 2019, the party's domination in the Greek far-right scene was clear. Their continuous electoral success enabled its MPs and MEPs to express their ideology without constraints as they were facing no competition from other Greek far-right groups. Xenophobia, Islamophobia, and the promotion of nationhood became central themes in their rhetoric. They capitalized on many important issues, including the Macedonian name dispute, Greece's relations with Turkey and tensions in the Balkan Peninsula. Even the Greek Parliament's decision to suspend Golden Dawn's election fund in late 2013 because of their criminal activities, was not enough to stop them. Many Greeks saw it as an attempt to censor and punish the party.

A Criminal Organization

In October 2020, the leader of Golden Dawn and his inner circle were handed 13-year prison sentences. The party was also found guilty of operating a criminal organization. More than 1,100 documents about alleged crimes committed by party members and officials were examined during the trial, while hundreds of witnesses testified from 2015 to 2020. 69 defendants, including fifteen former MPs and leader Nikolaos Michaloliakos, all worked together as a gang for many years and adopted a military structure to recruit volunteers and organize themselves in Athens. Unsurprisingly, many Golden Dawn MPs had been involved in crimes before their parliamentary stints. According to Greek law, convicted citizens are allowed to run in general elections in Greece.

The investigation into Golden Dawn's activities originally began in September 2013, after the killing of Pavlos Fyssas, also known as Killah P. The young rapper was murdered in Keratsini by Golden Dawn enforcer Giorgos Roupakias, and according to his testimony, it was ordered directly by the party to send a clear message: Golden Dawn's power in the streets of Athens is indisputable. At the time, in a televised statement, Prime Minister Antonis Samaras called for public calm and stated that he would stop "the descendants of the Nazis from poisoning our social life,

to act criminally, to terrorize and to undermine the foundations of the country which gave birth to democracy." But nothing really changed after the murder. At the height of the Greek fiscal crisis, Golden Dawn MPs also orchestrated numerous attacks on migrants and left-wing groups – in some cases spreading their violent tactics to rural areas across the country.

The distrust in both Greek and European elites and their strong anti-migrant stance helped Golden Dawn gain significant momentum

The events of September 2013 resulted in the temporary imprisonment of many Golden Dawn MPs, who were not suspended from their parliamentary duties, despite an ongoing investigation to determine whether they were part of a criminal syndicate. The party was not banned from running in general elections and quickly recovered in the two general elections of January and September 2015, retaining its third position in the Greek Parliament. It could be argued that Greek voters were rewarding Golden Dawn for their extremism and violent tactics.

What Remains of Golden Dawn

Up until May 2021, two convicted members of Golden Dawn were still at large. The first, Ioannis Lagos, a 48-year-old former nightclub bouncer and more recently Member of the European Parliament, had already been convicted in Greece on several charges and sentenced to 13 years in prison. However, soon after the verdict he made use of his diplomatic immunity to flee to Brussels. The process of stripping him of his immunity took approximately eight months, as the European Parliament had to initiate a special vote, which was delayed because of the global pandemic. The second member still at large is deputy leader Christos Pappas, who, to this day, refuses to turn himself in. Interpol and the Greek government launched an international investigation, which has so far failed to produce any results. In the past, Christos Pappas has been photo-

graphed numerous times under Nazi flags, whilst he is widely believed to be the ideological father of Golden Dawn and perhaps the most dangerous member of the party.

Other far-right parties emerged to replace the gap left by Golden Dawn

So, is Golden Dawn fully gone? With most of their members in prison, the party has lost both its leadership and political power in Greece. But other far-right parties have recently emerged to replace the gap left by Golden Dawn. A notable example is the ultranationalist Greek Solution, which surfaced in the 2019 general election and won 10 seats in the Parliament. Although it has not endorsed Golden Dawn's extremism, it shares many similarities with the neo-Nazis. Their leader Kyriakos Velopoulos is currently the new leading voice in Greek far-right politics and has a long history of political activity with several right-wing parties, including the Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) and more recently New Democracy. His experience might play an instrumental role in "restructuring" the far-right in Greece in the future. Any potential alliances with other parties could also include Golden Dawn, which is still represented in the Athens City Council by Ourania Michaloliakou. She happens to be the daughter of the former leader of Golden Dawn and has been involved with the party's political activism for more than a decade.

Conclusion

Golden Dawn's outlawing was a very lengthy process in Greek politics, but it is still a landmark victory for victims, their families and civil society. Greek justice managed to ultimately tackle Golden Dawn's hateful ideology and the violence initiated by the party's members. They are not welcome in Greek society anymore. The verdict, therefore, not only represents a solemn commitment undertaken by society, but is also a victory for anti-fascist movements after years of campaigning against neo-Nazi violence. The verdict also marked the first step towards reparation

for the victims of these acts and is an important reminder of the dangers that the manipulation of collective fears, propaganda and stigmatization can pose to societies.

Golden Dawn's activities also show that its MPs engaged in domestic terrorism under the mask of operating a political party. The outlawing of the party also opens up a much-needed debate about right-wing extremism in Greece and the much-needed structural reforms of the Greek justice system, the slowness of which allowed Golden Dawn to roam free for more than six years after the murder of Pavlos Fyssas. If successful, those reforms could lead to a new era in Greek politics where violent militia and extremism are no longer tolerated in any of their current forms. In theory, Golden Dawn is no more, but in practice – and when the opportunity arises – its remnants could return.

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