

The rise of the Golden Dawn is not a natural consequence of the economic crisis, but a reflection of wider problems in Greek society

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Last month Greek authorities arrested several members of the right-wing Golden Dawn following a number of incidents, including the murder of a left-wing activist. [Daphne Halikiopoulou](#) and [Sofia Vasilopoulou](#) argue that attempts to crackdown on the party are not only justified, but should have taken place earlier. They note that the implication of several police and army officers in the arrests suggests a wider problem in Greek society, and that the party's rise to prominence should not be seen as a simple reaction to the economic crisis.



On the morning of Saturday September 28th 2013, the Greek press reported [the arrest](#) of 20 or so Golden Dawn MPs and members for the involvement in and management of a criminal organisation. Some of those arrested include the leader of the Golden Dawn, Nikos Michaloliakos, prominent MPs including Elias Kassidiaris, Nikos Mihos, Elias Panagiotaros and Ioannis Lagos as well as a number of police officers. Those arrested faced a series of charges, including the murder of left-wing activist [Pavlos Fyssas](#); the murder of a Pakistani immigrant in Athens a few months earlier; two attempted murders against immigrants; several beatings and incidents of grievous bodily harm; and blackmail and money laundering. The authorities were also concerned with accusations with regard to the recruitment of children in accordance to Nazi practices.



A few days later most of those arrested were released on bail. The party remains legal and convenes in Parliament. Ambiguity remains on the legal status and the future of the Golden Dawn given the lack of clear provisions for such cases in the Greek Constitution. Further uncertainty is added by the Greek law of immunity granted to MPs.

Although its popularity has been in decline, the party still remains strong. According to a [poll](#) published on October 8th 2013, the Golden Dawn retains its position as the third party after New Democracy and SYRIZA with 6.9 per cent. Although this percentage is lower than the support polls were indicating just before the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, it is still not much different to the levels of support the party received during the latest Greek elections in June 2012. The same poll indicated that six out of ten Green citizens believed that the crackdown on the Golden Dawn does not entail its political demise.

If anything, the crackdown shows the extent to which the Golden Dawn problem is deeply rooted and dangerous. The implication of a number of police and army officers raises the question of the impartiality of what is the only source of organised and legitimate violence in a state. An interview shown on Greek TV by a major TV channel featured a former member of the Golden Dawn who revealed how the party organised combat groups, which formally trained in army camps having gained access by senior army officials. If the state is unable to fully control the two key institutions of police and army, then this raises fundamental questions about the nature of Greek democracy and the strength of its institutions.

It also begs the question why such a crackdown did not take place earlier. The murder of a Pakistani immigrant, only a few months before, failed to generate such a response. It had to be a violent act against a Greek citizen that prompted the authorities to act. This reveals the deeply embedded and large-scale intolerant attitudes that exist in Greece, and raises the issue of equality or lack thereof on ethnic grounds.

These events also show that what is happening in Greece is to a large extent a unique and localised phenomenon,

and that the rise of right-wing extremism is not necessarily the result of economic crisis. Other European countries facing similar crisis conditions including the economic problems of debt, low growth and high unemployment have not seen such a rise in right-wing extremism. In Ireland there is no extreme right-wing party. In Spain, the regionalist/nationalist Platform for Catalonia has experienced some increase in its support at the local level, but this is only marginal. In Portugal the Partido Nacional Renovador remains on the fringes of the party system. And in Italy, support for Lega Nord actually declined in the latest elections.

The crisis has not created the rise of the Golden Dawn, but it has facilitated it by exposing the weak democratic foundations of Greek society. If we define extremism as the absence of pluralism, then we may understand the rise of the extreme right in Greece in terms of the country's nationalist culture and the historically embedded political polarisation between left and right. Unlike other countries, which have experienced civil war and right-wing dictatorships such as Portugal and Spain, in Greece the post-dictatorship era became premised on weak institutions, governed by a logic of populism, corruption and clientelism. This contained, but did not eradicate Greece's culture of political polarisation, violence and intolerance.

The recent economic crisis, which threw the political system into turmoil, has resulted in the political expression of extremism. As such the long-term solution cannot be found in only addressing the legal aspect of the Golden Dawn problem. More important is a focus on its social dimension: i.e. longer-term policies that will foster a society that does not produce a culture of intolerance. What is needed is a strengthening of civil society and an education system that promotes pluralism, respect for institutions and the Rule of Law; in other words, a strong, liberal, mainstream political centre which values not simply procedural, but most importantly substantive democracy.

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Protest against the Golden Dawn in Athens, Credit: Kokotron (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

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