

Syriza's choice: the coalition government in Greece from a different perspective

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/greeceatlse/2015/02/19/syrizas-choice-the-coalition-government-in-greece-from-a-different-perspective/

HO
Editor **By Rosa Vasilaki**

2015-2-19

Three weeks in office the coalition government in Greece appears to be dominating the headlines across Europe. No other government was asked to prove itself so early – practically from day one – and no other government enjoyed such impressive levels of public support and trust, as the recent polls demonstrate. This does not mean that Greeks have turned Marxists over night, but if anything, it reveals the immense level of discontent with the austerity policies followed by the previous government along with a certain willingness to try what a Left governance may look like. Naturally, economic matters have been the centre of attention pre and post elections, however, there are political as well as symbolic developments stemming from the nature of the coalition government, which have so far been overlooked.



Syriza's choice to form a coalition government with ANEL (Independent Greeks) received much criticism from the opposition and the mainstream press alike. Indeed this seems like an unnatural choice, given the dividing lines of internationalism versus patriotism defining the political landscape throughout the twentieth century, as well as a number of cultural issues determining the social imaginaries of the Left and Right in Greece. Syriza has been accused of making an opportunistic and even dangerous choice. In this climate, moral indignation has, to a certain extent, overshadowed political analysis. Placing Syriza's choice within the political and historical context which made it possible may allow for a different reading of the situation.

Syriza, as well as Alexis Tsipras himself, have often been compared to PASOK and Andreas Papandreou respectively, and although this is a problematic comparison, there is certainly an analogy to be drawn in terms of responding to a pressing popular demand. If for 1981 'change' – meant as democratization after the authoritarian rule of the Colonels' dictatorship along with the overdue liberalisation of personal ethics – was the central issue at stake, then justice is the popular demand of the 2015 election. Syriza not only captured the public's mood but capitalised on that by choosing as a partner a political party which was 'clean' in terms of involvement with the austerity policies of the previous government but also with the long established political elites who led the country to economic disaster. Justice in this historical moment is defined by the widespread conviction of the unfair nature of austerity economics which hit the already disadvantaged much harder than the privileged ones. But the demand for justice in this context is more than economic relief and the restoration of life standards tout court. It also needs to be understood as anger against and rejection of the political and economic elites who led the country to the crisis as well as the failure to persecute a number of scandals which involved government officials, local and international businesses and the justice system itself.

Syriza succeeded in capturing the popular mood and in that sense, the choice of ANEL – given the refusal of the Communist Party to participate in a coalition government – was in this perspective the most sensible one. ANEL, itself a product of the crisis, is a traditionalist (often mistaken for a far right) party imbued by patriotic discourse which has held a clear anti-austerity line since 2012. Indeed the cultural makeup, as well as the cultural agenda, of ANEL could not be more far removed from those of SYRIZA, which has consistently had a clearly progressive agenda in matters of State and Church separation, immigration and integration policies, gay and minority rights, to mention but a few landmark issues. However, given the fact that economy, anti-austerity and the popular demand for justice overdetermined the agenda given the extraordinary circumstances, Syriza's pool of choice was extremely small.

Strategically, Syriza's choice of ANEL was proven right: support for the government has been overwhelming. This is partly because this move demonstrated to sympathisers, but most importantly to opponents, that the government is something more than a 'government of the Left for the Left'. Symbolically, the choice of ANEL was catalytic in engaging right wing voters, who now feel that they have got a stake in the government, and in creating a vast national consensus.

Lastly, these developments indicate a transformation of the political landscape in Greece. The dividing lines between the Left and the Right seem to be renegotiated and re-drawn. What we see in Greece is the reinvention of politics on purely and unapologetically economic terms: after almost three decades that the culturalisation of politics prevailed in the West, the economy seem to be setting the tone to the agenda. In that sense, austerity economics appear to have redefined post Cold War perceptions of the Left and Right along the lines of life politics to new divisions of the lower and middle classes versus the elites. Such redefinition of politics, however, has cost Syriza – along with the other anti-austerity parties – the accusation of populism. However, reducing analysis of such larger political changes to populism does not allow for the true recognition of the devastating effects of economic necessity and hastily mistakes the rejection of austerity agenda for xenophobia, the support for Welfare policies for backwardness and the recovery of national dignity for nationalism.

In that sense, Syriza may represent not just simply a change of government, but a change of regime. Certainly, Syriza's advent to power has clearly marked the end of an era which started with Metapolitefsi and the hope of 'allagi' (change) and ended in economic disaster. What Syriza's victory and unprecedented post elections support suggest is that the persuasive power of the narrative of austerity is weaning rapidly in Greece. Shall we witness the beginning of the end of neoliberal consensus in Europe? Will Spain, Italy and others follow? Does Syriza have a historic opportunity to transform the political landscape in Greece and in Europe? It remains to be seen.

Rosa Vasilaki has gained her PhD in Sociology from the University of Bristol and her PhD in History from the Ecole des Hates Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Her research on social history focused on the transformation of gender and political identities in Greece throughout the interwar years, the Resistance and Civil War. Her research on sociology revolved around the challenge of religious identities and multiculturalism to secularism as political ethos and the issues raised by postsecularism to critical social theory. Rosa's current research project is entitled 'Policing the Crisis: The Views and Experiences of Greek Police Officers in Times of Turmoil'.