

Beyond the confusion, a decisive shift

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Ismini
Demades

by **Professor Kevin Featherstone**

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A week ago, Greece had some of its best headlines in the international media since before the crisis began. The quick and decisive actions against Chrysi Avghi showed the strength of the democratic spirit. This was a fight-back against a Neo-Nazi force at a time when the extreme right was making inroads into the stagnant politics of other European societies. I felt proud of Greece when explaining these actions to my friends in London.

The previous week I'd witnessed a Chrysi Avghi street protest in Athens. I came away with a deeply disturbing image of the intimidating swagger of a young man, his face covered, walking ahead of the demonstration, inviting onlookers to challenge his command over the street, as the police stood back. The closest parallel I'd witnessed previously was of English football hooligans or of the Protestant 'Orange Order' marches. Far from being the worst episode of Chrysi Avghi protest, the young man was nevertheless mocking authority and ready to unleash the passion for violence evident in his party. The British friend alongside me had never been to Greece before and I despaired at what she was thinking as we watched.

Then, on Wednesday, it seemed that the most laudable of intentions risked being thwarted by state confusion, if not incompetence. The Court decided that three Chrysi Avghi members could be released. Yet, the next day, Michaloliakos, Lagos and Patelis were remanded in custody. Was there such a difference in the strength of the evidence or, rather, was it an acknowledgement by the Court of the public outcry after the first were released? If the latter, this would be very worrying. The preparation of the cases themselves seemed a little flaky. The indictments had been trailed across the newspapers, breaking legal safeguards. Then the contact details of a 'protected' witness had been given to the accused, putting them at great risk. For the democratic spirit to triumph requires proper preparation and avoiding an ERT-like debacle. The rest of the world will celebrate not only because the right people are standing trial, but also only if the right process and principles are followed.

The most worrying aspect of this episode, though, has been the admission that the authorities have had files and files of evidence against Chrysi Avghi and had sat on them, doing nothing. We had a flashback to the Lambrakis Affair and the collusion of the police with the dark forces of pre-junta Greece. The admission undermined the legitimacy of the state's own institutions and fanned foreign exasperation of what kind of system exists in Greece. Thankfully, the purge of senior police figures helped to signal a new resolve.

Indeed, beyond the immediate confusion, the events of the last week need to be put in larger perspective. The decision to act against Chrysi Avghi may come to represent a decisive turn in Greece's political class. The will to confront fascist criminality was heard and not only in Greece. A bridge has been crossed and it won't be easy to retreat.

The electoral base of Chrysi Avghi is a fragile one – both in its sense of economic and social vulnerability, but also in its searching for almost any protest lead. The Greek electorate is not turning fascist; instead, more may be coming rejectionist. The Chrysi Avghi members arrested may have hidden Nazi memorabilia and swastikas in their homes for late night thrills, but ordinary 'Kostas' or 'Maria' does not. Repeated action against the party can only expose how 'un-Greek' these people are. TV reminders of the Athens famine and the Holocaust would also be timely.

This last week, mainstream Greek politics found a common purpose and showed a new willingness to face down opponents. Greece's friends have yearned for such a moment. We can only hope that the shock of this discovery will embolden it to continue forward.

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