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Back to the 1930s: the hammer, sickle and swastika

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Ten days before Greece's elections, a member of the neo-nazi party, Golden Dawn, repeatedly hit a female candidate of the communist party while appearing live on a television talk show and threw water over a female candidate of the radical left Syriza. The communist had just called him a "bloody fascist" and he addressed her as a "commie". Greek elites (journalists, intellectuals, politicians) condemned his violence almost unequivocally. Yet the ugliest part of this incident was the readiness of many lay people to defend him, even cheer him, while the neo-nazis rose in the polls.

Unfortunately this episode was not isolated. Despite the narrow victory of a centrist party in Sunday's vote, almost every day extremist violence breaks out in Athens and beyond. Neo-nazis against immigrants, anarchists and leftists. Anarchists, ultra-leftists and other fringe groups of the nationalist-populist camp against riot police, mainstream politicians, journalists, liberal intellectuals, even artists. Add to this a surge in crime and rising tolerance of violence and you have a clearer picture of today's Athens. Does it remind you of anything?

That's right. Greece's situation recalls the Weimar Republic.
Violence (and its banalisation), hate, rage, polarisation, fear,
despair and resignation. As for the police, it has already taken sides: neo-nazis won by a landslide in polling stations where officers were assigned to vote.

The electoral results demonstrate the dangers to the Greek democracy. The centre-right New Democracy party may have edged ahead, but the parliament, for the first time in Greek history, will be full of extremists. Besides the neo-nazis and a Stalinist communist party there is Syriza, whose leader is a fan of Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. It is difficult to find a notable dictator, even among the great butchers of the 20th century, without a steady following in the Greek parliament. The three protagonists of the dreadful TV incident were also elected. Imagine them together in routine parliamentary proceedings. Golden Dawn members have already made it clear they would come down hard on any member of parliament saying something they strongly disapprove of.

How did Greece, the birthplace of democracy, come to have a parliament full of hammers, sickles and swastikas? This is not how it was ever meant to be. After winning independence in the late 1820s, Greece was attached to the west and particularly to the UK, which protected

and patronised Greece until it was replaced by the US in the late 1940s. This patronage had some beneficial side effects. Greece was always on the winning side: in the first world war, the second world war, the cold war. From 1929 to 1980 Greece had an average growth rate of 5.2 per cent and was admitted to the European Community as early as 1981 partly as a reward.

The rest is history: welfare populism, cronyism, statism and corruption can describe the Greek political system for most of the period from 1981. This is why Greek people have finally punished the two former main parties (New Democracy and the social-democratic Pasok party) for leading Greece into a horrible economic crisis with huge debts and deficits and a corrupt, inefficient state, unfit for reform and captured by special interests.

This failure of the mainstream political system and of the short-sighted, growth-stifling austerity policies enforced by the European leadership led Greece to the precipice. Greek people are disillusioned, miserable, exasperated and very frightened. They seem to be falling into the same trap again, by rewarding demagoguery, political opportunism and arrogant ignorance. Their knee-jerk reaction was to vote for parties such as Syriza, the rightwing nationalist and populist Independent Greeks and the Golden Dawn. These parties became vehicles for a popular backlash, gathering more than 41 per cent of the vote.

However, more than 50 per cent of Greeks voted for parties strongly committed to European unification. These parties will probably form a government that must achieve the impossible: renegotiate better bailout terms and enforce reforms in the face of fierce opposition from Syriza.

Mario Vargas Llosa wrote recently in El Pais that “Greece is the symbol of Europe and symbols cannot be abolished without that which they embody collapsing and degenerating into the barbaric confusion of irrationality and violence that Greek civilization liberated us from”.

Yet Greece is only a small step away from civil unrest and total collapse. It does not deserve this. Europe has the power to push us off the cliff but also the ability to hold us back and save us. This is not just an economic decision; it is largely a political decision. A fatal mistake will haunt Europe for ever.

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