

GREECE: THE END OF APATHY, THE AUDACITY OF HOPE

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It is hard to put into words what has been happening in Greece since 6 December with the shooting of a 15 year old by a policeman who thought he is a combination of Rambo and Dirty Harry while forgetting that both celluloid heroes sought to protect the innocent. Although rage and a feeling of helplessness still make concentration and proper expression extremely difficult at this time, I cannot help thinking that maybe 6 December 2008 is as important a date for Greece as 23 July 1974, the day the military government in Greece collapsed and democracy was reinstated with Konstantinos Karamanlis becoming Prime Minister a day later.

Since 1974, the country has fully reintegrated into NATO, joined the European Community/European Union in 1981, adopted the Euro, significantly contributed to the 'europeanisation' of its neighbourhood with Balkan states either having joined the EU or committed to join in the future and Turkey negotiating its candidacy, helped ensure the membership of Cyprus to the Union, hosted successfully the 2004 Olympic Games, etc. At the same time, basic socioeconomic indicators have improved the quality of life of its citizens with the country's GDP per capita ranked 18th out of 180 countries according to the IMF, its Human Development Index ranked 24th out of 177 countries according to the UNDP, and its Worldwide Quality of Life Index ranked 22nd out of 111 countries according to the Economist, while annual growth has averaged over 4% between 2003 and 2007, among others. Yet malaise prevails.

Why? A closer look at some of the indicators could begin to provide some of the answers. For example, while official unemployment figures for September 2008 show that it stands at 7,4%, it is over 24% for the 15-24 age group and 10% for the 25-34 age group and twice as much for women than for men. This implies the need for major structural reforms of the economic and social system, in particular in the sectors of education, health and the public sector

at large. Yet, reform has been an ongoing theme of all governments since 1974. Why have they failed? Vested interests have profited from chronic structural woes which the public at large seems to have accepted as part and parcel of their daily lives. *The Economist* may unfortunately be right when it suggests that "Life is tough for youngsters with energy and talent but no cash or connections."

Yet, the malaise which is compounded by the world economic crisis is even deeper. Has the political system gone bankrupt? Since the return of democracy, Greece has been governed by two parties that were founded at the time – PASOK and New Democracy in September and October 1974 respectively. While the two aforementioned parties are still the only ones that actually possess the wherewithal to rule the country with relatively reliable and mainstream party platforms committed to the further integration of Greece to the core of European integration, the fact that the choice is still one between a Karamanlis and a Papandreou while lesser political families continue to play key roles in both parties implies that many if not most feel that the political system is alien. The question is at the same time simple and harsh: at a time when a black person in the United States knows he can become President of his country, how many Greeks actually feel that they could become Prime Minister of their country or even aspire to it? The answer is unfortunately almost none. The problem is that the two parties that owe much of their support to clientelist policies leading to a bloated, dysfunctional public sector and requisite public debt which have reached their limits while the private sector is held hostage either to the lack of proper regulatory mechanisms, lack of competitiveness, or to crooked tax inspectors and the like. At the same time, no other credible alternative and inspiring political force exists while the two big parties seem at this stage unable to put their differences aside and do what needs to be done together.

As a result, on Tuesday, 9 December while riots were ongoing in different neighbourhoods in the centre of Athens, 65,000 Athenians were at the Olympic Stadium watching a Champions League game between Panathinaikos and

Anorthosis as if the fires in Athens and elsewhere had nothing to do with them! While the rage among the youth is an expression of the need for change; others think that what is going has nothing to do with them. Fortunately, the latter are wrong. The riots and continued protests have launched vigorous debates and discussions among an ever growing number of citizens that begin to understand that although safe in their middle class cocoons, apathy can only bring about further social, economic and political gridlock as well as more street violence. The audacity of hope, as Barack Obama suggests, will hopefully emerge from this painful process. The need for all to feel that the country, its citizens and its leaders can do better is paramount. Hopefully, 6 December 2008, in spite of its tragedy, marks a new beginning for all.