

Syriza Before and After the Elections: To Fight Another Day

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Michalis Spourdalakis interviewed by Pavlos Klavdianos

Pavlos Klavdianos (PK): Will the elections bring about changes in the balance of power and on the political system?

Michalis Spourdalakis (MS): The historical victory of the Left in [January](#) marked a change in the system of political representation which outlines a new dynamic for the political forces. However, the way in which this victory was achieved and the difficulties that the first government of the left faced, led after the [referendum of the 5 of July](#), to a big fallback, a big defeat. This defeat needs to be understood as a turning point in a long and large war for the victory of the left in the struggle for the control of state power. The government did not handle this well, it must be said, through the collective processes of the party, which resulted in totally justified emotional responses, mainly disappointment, and which in turn has created a general climate of disappointment and therefore centrifugal tendencies. It was a withdrawal and/or a defeat which however was not the result of a betrayal of a selfish or sneaky leadership. In my opinion, it was a manoeuvre in front of incredibly more powerful forces, in order to save strength and the ability to continue the war in the future. It is very important to see it in this way and not like an accomplishment the government is content with or even in terms of the simplistic logic that it now accepts the notion that there is no alternative.

Syriza and Society

BS: There is stern criticism being voiced against Syriza for calling this election.



MS: Syriza won the elections by promising a very specific program (the [Salonica program](#)), was forced to back down and so they are turning to the people for a decision, with a new political strategic proposal. There is of course the parliamentary dimension (loss of the majority), but this was not the defining factor. Syriza is guided by a different logic. It was founded and was developed on the basis of the promise that it would “bring society to the stage.” It also promised to do this with its action at the social level... it would go to the social movements, learn from them, and would form a government that would take into account not just the technocratic hierarchies but also the experience gained from the social movements. Moreover, for Syriza the prerequisite for this strategy was based on the call for the unity of the Left. This was its strategy when it said that it is not interested whether someone was coming from one or the other ideological or party background or movement

and spoke of the “whole of the Left” in pluralistic way.

So, Syriza with its action on a social level and with its program which is based on this action attempted to engage the institutions [aka the Troika: European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank]. It stands therefore with one leg in the society and the social movements and the other in a serious, systemic presence in the institutions: in the parliament, in the peripheral and municipal level and also in the unions, the co-ops, the various citizens’ movements etc. With these prerequisites, it gained the “right” to govern, to manage the state power, in a different logic from which had been imposed in the post-Junta years.

BS: It is difficult to be convinced that it honors the logic you presented. Isn’t this suggested by its fall in the polls?

MS: This weakness stems from the fact that Syriza reached 27 per cent in 2012, through the logic I described, but I fear that even the top cadre of the party, who had helped shape and were operating under this logic, had not fully understood the significance of this strategy. No theoretical or education work to ensure the consolidation of “the Syriza way” was conducted.

Thus, after 2012, Syriza gradually slid into somewhat “governmental” practices and hurried to ascend to power, “at all costs.” It gave much emphasis to the parliamentary game and the action in the social field seemed a routine. It ceased to take initiatives in the society, be inventive as it was in 2010 or 2011. This became apparent in the 2012 convention and even more clear in the 2013 founding conference where the issues discussed were mainly procedural in nature, apparently isolated from the social field, concerned with only “party organizational matters.” Without any inspiration and creativity, the organization was unable to maintain and support this strategy of Syriza, which up until the 2012 election was more pure and fresh.

Absolute Naivety

BS: But there was popular pressure for Syriza to govern.

MS: The critical assessment we make, cannot simply be attributed to the deficit of the choices of leadership but is a response to real pressures and necessities, arising from the social dynamics and political necessity. It was a “mobilization” of Syriza from the popular classes, which required it to govern. So, the organizational problems of Syriza were not addressed, the necessary adjustments to the new situation were not made, which would require a better consolidation of the party’s strategy.

At the same time, there have been a series of naiveties, having to do with the action of Syriza within the country and the perception of the international environment. There is a perception that if we went to Europe and voiced our view in a well-documented and clear way, this will be heard and the “institutions” would subside. “Institutions” which, however, are filled by neoliberal logic and express very hard and inflexible interests. This was a huge naivety, which decisively influenced the negotiation. In respect to Greece itself, the major naivety had to do with the party. Since the electoral influence was expanding, the leadership implicitly seems to think that a vibrant, democratic, participatory party was not all that necessary. The theoretical work was ignored and the notion was if you take the government that will be enough to allow you to gradually change the domestic balance of

power. The naivety of that view, was based on an instrumental conception of power and the state, led the government to tolerate key figures in public administration serving other goals or even appoint technocrats, who clearly had a different make-up and skill-set than the ones required to serve the social alliances with Syriza.

The social alliance that made Syriza comprises not only of the lower social classes (workers, precarious workers, the unemployed, etc.) but also the so-called petty bourgeoisie traditional class (shopkeepers, small traders, etc.), crushed under the austerity policies, as well as the new petty bourgeoisie (self-employed, the urban educated strata and so on). This is the alliance Syriza should have in mind and to strengthen, however slowly, with structural reforms to change the balance of power, despite the adverse conditions, and so to open roads for a broader social transformation.

BS: The idea that when we take the government everything will be done, it was a blatantly instrumental view.

MS: Exactly! Despite the theoretical achievements of the radical, “regenerative” left, standing against instrumental logic, the Syriza government did not follow this. It showed an absolute naivety. Thus the government ran into a wall. The left government proved more inefficient than what you expect, so the criticism is, I think correctly, stating that beyond the limitations of the memorandum, in other areas where it does not touch, the government was not as effective as it had to be.

BS: Do you think that the current difficulty of Syriza to rally, in the elections, its influence on January 25, and its new earned influence even despite the onerous agreement, has its roots in the post-2012 period?

MS: From 2012 onward, I think Syriza became more “governmental,” even before getting the government. It forgot, somehow, what had brought it to the fore, the protagonist of the developments in the country and in Europe, the alter-globalization democratic movement. However, after the retreat this July, the following risk presented itself: the management of that defeat would have heavier political effects than just those resulting from the continuing economic repression it required. First, it did not happen through the collective proceedings of the party, although many excuses given for this were to some extent understandable. It is, however, wrong to claim that the party had become a pro-memorandum, a pro-austerity one. Syriza is not that. We had a government, “with Syriza being its backbone” which in the face of “the EU coup” – we have to say this – was forced to retreat. This party was constructed and strengthened in a completely different orientation, as I explained earlier, drawing strength from distress and resistance struggles against austerity over the last five years.

BS: On what basis, then, can a political recovery be achieved?

MS: First of all, Syriza should reaffirm its pluralism, in terms of radical, regenerative Left. The party’s and the subsequent government’s character, has to take some lessons from the seven months’ tenure. Secondly, the people selected will have to mark this achievement. Thirdly, we need to appreciate the importance that the government has in managing the state. One cannot say “oh, it’s too difficult, I will leave the management of the state.” That is because the state resources are key for the left to strengthen the subordinate classes and change institutions and relations, from state centered to societal centered. Instead, it must manage them in an innovative way, especially under the restrictions put in place by the new

agreement.

Something else that must be done, and I think Syriza does it to an extent, is put higher in its agenda the importance of renegotiation of the debt and to be connected with an investment program in the social sector. This will not only alleviate the difficulties imposed by this agreement in the social field, but will also at least give a vision, a positive look to the immediate future of subordinate classes. To promote its contribution to the new strategy, a new vision that we should give to Greek society is key in order to revive the hope that Syriza represented. We also need to overcome the not very democratic functioning of Syriza. The party should quickly proceed to a conference designed to mend the bridges with those who were disappointed, tired, totally justifiably, given how much Syriza had inspired so many.

BS: Syriza is a socially oriented political force; this is clear and those who believe that this was lost because of the forced agreement are wrong. However, there are two elements in its theoretical equipment that suffer, had not been assimilated and, unfortunately, we are going to need them now very much. The first one is that Syriza is not only an anti-memorandum party, but also a left one, which results in its having a great range of action, especially in the Greek society. The second one is the purpose – especially the ability to materialize it – of the transformation of the Greek society and economy. What has been revealed about Syriza’s deficiencies in terms of these characteristics is what this discussion is trying to underline.

MS: And this is the reason why I insisted on the need to renew, to retrieve, to recapture, to realize and systematize Syriza’s strategy. For a long time now, it has become clear that we needed to cast the anti-memorandum character off and insist that we are against austerity entirely and the internal devaluation that goes with it, and this requires that we must become actually anti-neoliberal today and, finally, somehow anti-capitalist. This has not been done and it must get done now; to be creative not only in fields that are not affected by the memorandum, but also in fields that are affected by the memorandum.

This tactic gives us another power, another perspective, knowing – and saying – that this is not the maximum that we want to manage, but that along with the debt reduction, recommit ourselves to the democratic goals we need to realize in terms of transparency, fighting corruption, upgrading local government, democratizing public administration, stopping tax evasion etc., all of which would substantially undermine the reproductive core of Greek capitalism. After all, corruption, or what is called here “interlocking,” is actually key for the reproduction of Greek capitalism, so it is not just a moral or merely a legal issue. The new strategic discussion required for this will need to be a long one, because such a transformation plan needs to involve all the forces of the party, and it should be recalled that Alexis Tsipras, even at the Central Committee meeting after “the coup” himself said that we want to start the procedures for the general social transformation. But for this to happen, all these strategic elements need to be discussed, and in a way that is always moving toward their verification.

BS: The problem we are discussing relates to one of the root causes of the split, in the sense of the non-consolidation of this strategy or maybe also of its non-acceptance by those comrades who formed [Popular Unity](#) (L.A.E.)

MS: I would like to remind people that the majority of Syriza’s former members who are now connected with Popular Unity have also had an instrumentalist perception of the state, which the majority of Syriza itself does not espouse. Moreover, what Syriza used to say in its

formal texts about social control was not absolutely understood by that tendency which is now Popular Unity, and which always gave great emphasis on state control. The understanding of socialism in terms of social control not state control is one of the key achievements of today's radical and regenerative left which, as it seems, this tendency did not share. A third element is that this tendency could not fully understand the importance of solidarity networks and social movements and actually concluded in a refusal to participate. There was confusion, because it was thought that solidarity is charity.

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What this reflects is that words in the party program had different meaning for different tendencies in the party, which led to many misunderstandings, but there were no procedures for real theoretical and political debate and discussion. The "federal" nature of the tendencies in the party did not help; they functioned more or less as small or larger networks and even as movements or parties within the party, so that almost no common understanding was allowed. It was thought that through decisions from above, minorities and majorities in the founding Congress, things could be addressed. This is a tedious job, which requires a functional, living party, the organization of which will support the strategy of Syriza and that organizationally will be what is really the "new" about the "Syriza way." The lack of this must be attributed, to some extent, to the split in the party that has now occurred and which costs so much energy, efficiency and votes.

Let me add one more thing. No one takes initiatives, which either force some people to the exit, or undermine the management of the state from the left, unless you have an instrumental conception of power. That is to say a perception that if I am in the government, I will make it. Or counter to that, that I cannot stay in government since I can readily implement the whole of my political project and so I retire. So, these two aspects have met at the same place. Can you criticize from either side of the management of the state and power, if you haven't grounded what you want to do in the real social and political balance of power not only in our country but also in Europe?

We know from the history of the Left that no social transformation could happen in a single country, let alone today with the processes of global capitalist integration, and which also institutionally now due to the EU relates to the hard core of capitalist dynamics. You do not give up, however, the government for that reason. We shall retake the thread and through a "Syriza's way" build the party, as we built it gradually since 2006, even without full knowledge of what we were up to. Anything else will be a tacit acceptance of post-democratic currents, that does not want collectivities, but sees management policy, more or less along the lines in which businesses operate. Instead, I believe that there are still resources in Syriza which if properly exploited will not only lead it to recover but will guarantee a real take off. Laying the ground for this positive outlook might be the best outcome of the election. •

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