

# Rekindling Hope: SYRIZA's Challenges and Prospects

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Before turning to the main theme of this article it would be very useful to come to terms with at least the following *preliminary observations*:



Greek farmers protesting against planned pension system reforms.

The left in government and especially the radical left in government has never been the subject of easy discussion among leftists. As the project of social transformation was never a peaceful stroll in the park, the debates on the question of in and/or out of government, let alone those about political power, have been very heated. In fact, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that these debates are as old as the left itself. Before, during, and after coming into office, leftist theorists and practitioners have been involved in fierce discussions and heated arguments, often leading to organizational splits and fragmentation. The intense polemical nature of these debates has very rarely led to useful, positive, and practical conclusions for the left.

In addition, these debates, which characterize not only the 'old left', often tend to be ahistorical in the sense that they engage in, or are even based on, comparisons with situations whose objective and subjective conditions were or are quite different. It is thus not surprising that there are a number of attempts to compare SYRIZA's socio-political experiment with that of the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil or of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Even if one is obliged to do so, one has to bear in mind that we are then comparing political experiences arising in quite different social formations, different continents, and of course with different geopolitical and institutional constraints. At the same time, one should realise that we are talking about different parties with different social bases, histories, and socio-political traditions within which they operate. Therefore if these comparisons are to help provide a framework for more effective socialist strategy, their relevance should be understood with the appropriate degree of abstraction without viewing them as providing concrete recipes to be applied directly.

Finally, before we look at the Greek case, we need, given the developments of the last few months, to come to terms with the notion of 'defeat'. Since the left is committed to the subaltern social strata, to the under-class, and to all oppressed people, and is guided by a vision of human emancipation, defeats are perforce a recurrent experience. In fact, historically, at least since 1848, it seems that retreats and defeats can be seen as one of the constituent components of the left's identity. Therefore a defeat, such as that experienced by the SYRIZA government last summer should not lead to defeatism, to individual retreat and withdrawal, or even worse to panic. On the contrary, we should confront the left's defeats as useful developments and as prime opportunities to identify and understand mistakes and shortcomings. In this sense, there are no absolute defeats or absolute victories. After a major political development for the left such as a defeat and, even more, a victory, the left's strategy should not lead to calm reassurance. In the last analysis, as the left's history is one of a long series of defeats and victories, we must realise that no attempt at radically transforming society has ever been anything but a painful marathon with numerous retreats, defeats, diversions, and short-term disappointments.

## **SYRIZA's Defeat?**

When Alexis Tsipras conceded to the blackmail of the so-called 'institutions' on 12 July 2015, he did what any sensible and committed trade unionist, negotiating on the basis of an overwhelming (61 per cent) strike vote and confronted with the vindictive response of a management threatening to close down the business, would have done. Logic prevailed and the SYRIZA government retreated. Under the circumstances, retreat is a key word; it was the only way to avoid the disastrous social, economic and political consequences.

No one in his or her right mind could claim that this setback, or more accurately defeat, was the result of treason and/or subversion from within. This dramatic retreat, especially after the impressive result of the referendum, should be taken as the basis for creatively rethinking how to continue to serve what SYRIZA has long committed itself to – the 'strategic goal of social transformation'. This strategic goal, despite superficial analyses, remains the main goal of SYRIZA, as Tsipras stated clearly in his address to the last session of the party's Central Committee (30 July 2015).

In this respect, there are some very important questions that need to be addressed. What led the promising radicalism of the SYRIZA government to such a dead end? Why did it not have a realistic and effective government plan in the event the negotiations failed? Why did it not recognize the uncompromising stubbornness and even vindictiveness of the country's lenders? Without answers to these questions it will be impossible to draw up a solid new strategy, given the new conditions and constraints that the new agreement imposes on the country.

To address these questions one has to go back to the 2012 election when what has been called the 'miraculous rise of SYRIZA' became more than a realistic prospect. More concretely, following the election that brought it into prominence, it seems that the party gradually drifted away from the strategy that had made it into a key player at the centre of the country's political scene. This development had given hope not only to those Greeks suffering from the effects of the memoranda but also to the concerned, democratic, and progressive citizens who had doubts about the social, political, cultural, and even ecological future of societies under the aggressive hegemony of neoliberal austerity in Europe and elsewhere.

## **SYRIZA's (forgotten?) Strategy**

The success of SYRIZA – to which of course specific political and social conjunctural conditions contributed – was the outcome of its unique political strategy in the Greek political arena. Its strategy had five principal elements. The first and basic element was its involvement in the social sphere, embedded as its activists were in the multifaceted social movements without engaging in the vanguardist practices

that usually prevail in the Leninist tradition and in fact in the post-[Junta](#) practices of the political system. The second element was its commitment to participating in the institutions of political and social representation in a way that prevented it from being subsumed by the bureaucratic constraints of those institutions. The third was the establishment of a programme based on this experience in the social field as well as in these institutions. The fourth was its call for the unity of the entire left tradition. Indeed, SYRIZA managed to become the common organization of all the traditions of the left: from the historic left (from the old social democratic tradition to all versions of communism, such as Maoism, Trotskyism, etc.) to all the specific concerns of the radical social movements. However, it was the fifth and final element of SYRIZA's strategy that proved most significant in distinguishing it from other left organizations, and which proved most decisive in its success. This was its explicit intention to come to power.

These distinct elements of the party's strategy, in a dialectical relationship with one another, proved very functional and effective. This was the case both at the social level by representing the social alliance of social strata that the austerity policies had created (between the working-class, precarious, unemployed, and the old and new middle class), as well as at the political level as an answer to the statism of the cartel-like party system. At least in retrospect, one needs to realise that this strategy, which started to emerge as early as 2004-2005 and became much clearer during the 2008 youth uprising, was not only the result of political planning but also evolved out of the contradictory pressures of limited electoral tactics. However, it must be stressed that it was underpinned by a federated pluralist organizational structure and a party culture that imitated the model of the mass party of the Leninist tradition although certainly not in substance.

So successful was SYRIZA's strategy that in the 2012 elections it became the leading opposition party. The handwriting was on the wall. No particularly astute political analysis was needed to recognize that this was no flash in the pan, and that SYRIZA would soon enter government.

## **Negligence**

The quick and unexpected emergence of this success in 2012 was probably what led much of the party's leadership to believe that effective politics would from then on be an easy affair, not requiring much further party development. They did not bother with consolidating or even fine-tuning the strategy that had brought about this success, in such a way as to facilitate the dissemination and deepening of this strategy among broader layers of society as well as among the party rank and file. Instead, the leadership adopted more conventional tactics, which in practice meant a rush to move toward power by all means available. Thus, gradually SYRIZA became not just parliamentarist but also governmentalist even before it came into office.

This was partly justified by its commitment to prevent the social calamity created by the aggressive austerity policies imposed by previous governments. However, now joined or at least supported by political figures with roots in a wide range of old and new political parties ranging from right-wing to centre-left modernizers, the leadership became alienated from SYRIZA's radical physiognomy as a party. This drifting away from what had previously characterized SYRIZA revealed the existence of a number of tacit perceptions and analyses that were to become real problems after its much-celebrated electoral victory in [January 2015](#). The rush to power not only bypassed a number of democratic procedures that were needed for the building of its party organization, especially after the fourfold increase in membership, but also resulted in a number of politically naïve mistakes, which would come all too quickly to the fore.

Without going into great detail, in addition to the unquestionably very hostile environment inside the country organized by the media, the opposition parties, and the oligarchs, these naïve ideas are in my opinion to blame for the dead end in which the SYRIZA government found itself when it was forced into last summer's dramatic retreat, which led to the adoption of the new Memorandum.

These naïve ideas, perceptions, and practices can be seen both on the internal front and in the international sphere. Although all of these had already been part of the party's baggage, there is no doubt that they became dysfunctional after the party leadership moved into office and adopted at the same time a very instrumentalist conception of power. On the one hand, its rhetoric to the contrary, the SYRIZA leadership now seemed to limit its conception of political change to governmental change (for example, no immediate plan for transforming the media, at best a formalization of its support for the social movements, a kind of polite, neutral, and slowly emerging response to the bureaucracy's undermining of government policies). On the other hand, key figures in the government felt it was necessary to appease the old establishment and the bourgeoisie. To this end, the so-called technocrats or experts who clearly have close relations with the old corrupt personnel and networks were recruited by the SYRIZA government into the state.

But behind this naïve and instrumentalist orientation to taking state power, one can detect similar problems in SYRIZA's party programme. Although the detailed programme was the product of enormous political and even scientific energy, it was never concretized to become a real operational plan. This was in some sense the side effect of the expectation that the change of government would be smooth and that the administration of the state by the radical left would not require any particular caution, let alone preparation.

Even on the internal party front, this naïve neglect has proven very damaging. The limited educational and informational work done within the party led to further problems. The membership was left uninformed and unsupported and thus frequently fell into the hands of propagandists both within and outside the party. One of the notions created was that all those who proposed a vague plan B (mainly the Left Platform) were identical with the radical wing of Syriza. Arguments around the party's strategy were often reduced to the simplistic euro vs. drachma dilemma.

Another naïve assumption motivated the tactic of most radical cadres (whose grouping came later to be known as the [Group of 53](#)), who more than anyone else were the key to the development of SYRIZA, to negotiate a *modus vivendi* with the part of the leadership that was in a rush to enter the government. It was an arrangement that, in addition to consuming the capacities of these cadres, did not even result in establishing certain rules for party building. In fact, the party organization fell increasingly into the hands of self-appointed leaders of small or larger networks and sub-groups within the party.

Such problems also characterized all wings of the party in terms of the international context and environment. It was assumed that what were called 'tough and honest negotiations' would be sufficient to convince the 'institutions', as if the outcome of these exchanges were a matter of rational, well documented, and well researched scientific arguments and not of naked power interests. In addition, the idea that one radical government alone, even if the prospect of others like it were emerging on Europe's periphery, could change the EU or ignore the structural reproductive commitment of the most aggressive capitalist interests, proved to be another naïveté.

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Given all this, the classic question of 'what is to be done', or better 'what can be done', becomes more urgent than ever. The point of departure for answering it, given the features of SYRIZA's victory (lack of enthusiasm and shrunken turnout) and the tight constraints of the 'Agreement', which make 'political time extremely compressed', should be a deep understanding of the party's strategy, especially during

the five-year period that preceded the 2012 election. The road map for drafting a new strategy under the new conditions created by the government's retreat needs one clear sign post: *to become SYRIZA again*. This means nothing other than continuing to govern without being eroded by governmentalism and continuing to solidify the party's relation to its social base without being paralysed by parliamentarism.

## Prospects

In the new post-Referendum, post-Memorandum and post-September 2015 victory conjuncture, given the economic and institutional constraints, SYRIZA should craft or even better re-draft its strategy based on its successful march toward government. Some key presuppositions of these prospects should be:

1. SYRIZA should stay in government. The administration of state resources is key not only for managing the 'Agreement' with the country's debtors in the most democratic and humane fashion possible, but also as a vehicle to organize political and social initiatives that can work under the radar of the Memorandum's constraints – as a 'parallel programme' – as well as a framework conducive to the long overdue task of party building.
2. SYRIZA should minimise the consequences of the rupture. After the creation of [Popular Unity](#) by the Left Platform and in response to the simplistic and emotional polemics coming from the 'other left' (Antarsia and the Communist Party of Greece) and the anarchists, SYRIZA is in danger of falling into the trap of unhelpful exchanges. This could prove counterproductive in any effort to plan and implement a 'parallel' and class-based programme that will transcend the social and political cleavages that developed around the Memorandum, turning them into creative pressures on the government along anti-austerity, anti-neoliberal, and eventually anti-capitalist lines.
3. SYRIZA should completely change its method of recruitment into the state. So far, and as a result of the government's instrumentalist understanding of state power, people from the old political, technocratic, and academic scene have quite often been recruited to the cabinet and more broadly to positions that depend on political appointments. Since part of SYRIZA's support came from the huge anti-establishment, anti-corruption popular sentiment, the presence or the re-emergence of such people in key positions strains the people's trust in the government as representing a political and ethical countercurrent. This does not mean that all new recruits should be in full agreement with the government; rather, the rising opportunism should be counteracted by the SYRIZA government's generosity toward party cadres who have expressed their scepticism of the party's strategy after last summer's retreat.
4. In addition to the creative social and political organizing that must be based on the party's experience in the social arena, a new strategic orientation should be formulated: Given SYRIZA's failed strategy vis-à-vis the 'institutions', it needs to reconsider its commitment to the Eurozone, even though under the current economic, political, and cultural circumstances, both the party and society are far from prepared to realistically assume a rejectionist position toward the latter, especially given the balance of power in Europe.
5. All the previous points are essentially proposals to deal with the defeat and to correct the mistakes and omissions that many radicals in and around SYRIZA have identified. However, the morale of the social base can be raised and consolidated only when a new goal is put forward and directly related to social developments. In this context, SYRIZA will have to have a clear and systematic commitment to actively return to the social field. This will be the key to rekindling hope. This hope naturally has to do with the reconnection and the mobilization of the party's social base and thus the reclaiming of its radical left identity. Without the effective creation of a new vision around which to mobilize, such as the improvement of social conditions through debt reduction, it will be very difficult to consolidate the social alliance of the working-class, the unemployed, pensioners, and the dramatically squeezed lower middle class who have supported SYRIZA massively.

These ideas, and probably many others, will need to be put forward in a very concrete fashion. They must all aim at dealing with the disappointment from the defeat and at recovering the morale and the trust of the social base, which invested its hopes in SYRIZA. These are not at all novel as they come straight from the very strategy that made the party of Greek radical leftists an inspiration not only to the country's citizens but to radical and democratic citizens worldwide. In the last analysis, one can see them as interpreting what Tsipras not long ago made ingeniously clear at a meeting of the party's Political Secretariat: "It is not a revolutionary act to escape from reality or to construct a fictional one. What is revolutionary is to find ways even when they do not exist."

In response to those who think it unlikely that anything like this can now be initiated because the party is far from being in a condition to sustain it, one can argue that political parties are voluntarist institutions par excellence. This is particularly true of left parties, especially young ones like SYRIZA with weak internal bureaucracies. To put it differently, the necessity for renewed party building and organizational development is a prerequisite to reconnecting with the strategy that propelled SYRIZA into the government and to regaining the ground lost since the defeat. Without this, the precious political capital created by the Greek people's democratic and anti-austerity struggles will be squandered. •

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