

BLOG: RESISTANCE AND RECONSTRUCTION

'Krisis': Can Greece inspire India?

The dramatic political transformation going on in Greece, with the victory of the leftist party SYRIZA, is worth watching closely for all those in India who hope for a just, sustainable future. Ashish Kothari deliberates upon the lessons to be learnt.



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It is too early to say whether the newly elected left-wing coalition SYRIZA will take Greek society into more equitable, sustainable directions, as the record of progressive political parties or movements that have managed to take power in many countries (such as Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela) has been mixed; in particular it has been difficult to sustain positive transformation. And yet, there is much to learn from whatever these movements have been able to achieve, and equally from what they have not.

The Greek transformation is, hopefully, not simply a change from an orthodox right (centred on corporate power) to an orthodox left (centred on state power). It is built on very widespread disillusionment and anger against the political and economic elite of Europe, who took Greece onto a disastrous path of 'austerity' that did little to redistribute wealth from the enormously rich minority to the struggling majority, and increased unemployment to record levels.



Supporters greet the president of SYRIZA, Alexis Tsipras in Thessaloniki. Pic: <http://syriza.net.gr/index.php/el/>

But it is also built on a spontaneous, widespread movement towards alternative economic and political arrangements that citizens have launched over the last few years. These are arrangements based on solidarity and collective work, and encompass everything from food and water security to employment and banking. (Equally interesting

in this respect is the sudden rise of the Podemos party in Spain, on which hopefully I will write in a subsequent piece).

SYRIZA's own 40-point agenda has a number of dramatic actions, and if it can deliver on even a fourth of these, it will have achieved a great deal. These include:

- Putting banks and essential services back into the public sector;
- Housing for the poor in government buildings and banks and churches; Promotion of renewable energy and ecologically sensitive manufacturing, tourism, and agriculture
- Redistributing wealth by heavily taxing the rich, corporations, financial transactions, and luxury goods;
- Free medical care for the poor;
- Empowering institutions of direct democracy at local levels;
- Rights to education, health care and environment;
- Drastic reduction in military expenditure and withdrawal of Greek military personnel from anywhere outside of Greece;
- 'Humanising' the police forces in relation to immigration and other social issues; and [many more](#)

Almost every one of these 40 points is in a direction very different from the neoliberal policies of other countries around the world, policies that have taken these countries and the earth to a point of ecological and social collapse.

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Of course, each of these will be enormously challenging to implement. It's all very well to nationalise services, for instance, but the trick lies in making them work efficiently).

Political expediency and the combined pressure of the more powerful countries of Europe are likely to lead to compromises. SYRIZA also seems to remain confined to the 'growth' formula for development and may not fully take on board the very feasible suggestions for an 'a-growth' or 'degrowth' pathway that many movements are advocating (see [this](#)). Nevertheless, the many progressive steps in its agenda are encouraging first steps.

The message for India

What can India learn from this? Obviously the conditions that have precipitated the rise of SYRIZA in Greece are not replicated here in their entirety. The *percentage* of people adversely affected (for example, in the form of visible unemployment) by neoliberal economic policies there is possibly much higher than in India, and in a small country it is easy for the suffering to be much more visible.

Here our burgeoning middle class, decidedly benefiting at least in some way from the economic liberalization of since the early 1990s, acts as an effective buffer between the poor masses and the elite, and the poor are in any case badly fragmented or disempowered due to caste, class, geographic, and other disabilities.

The sheer size of the country makes national mobilisation much more difficult. This is of course a simplistic analysis of the differences, and there would be other factors, but I'm only indicating that what has been possible in Greece may not be so easily possible here.

Nevertheless, there are important lessons we can learn. First, we need to identify and recognise the large numbers of alternative initiatives across India, in all economic, political and social fields, similar to those emerging out of the crisis in Greece (for a small glimpse, see www.vikalpsangam.org).

Those of us who have the ability and circumstances of not having to fend for the next meal, need to see how we can help network these initiatives, make their voices and inspiration known more widely, and help them influence political decision-making.



Peoples' movements need to be at the core of political change. In this picture, a rally of the Narmada Bachao Andolan at Badwani. Pic: Ashish Kothari

Newly emerging political formations such as the Aam Aadmi Party, progressive trade unions and farmers' movements, resistance movements against mining and dams and highways and nuclear power stations and so on, need to realise they have a common challenge: that of defeating the economic-political nexus that currently rules India, and that of building an alternative vision of society.

Environmental NGOs need to understand that without aligning with these political forces, they have no chance of their agenda being achieved. They also need to realise that flirting with technocratic and managerial fixes like carbon trading, REDD and REDD+, compensatory afforestation (while allowing natural forests to be diverted for 'development'), saving tiny bits of nature in protected areas (while allowing the rest of the landscape to be destroyed), and so on, do little to prolong the path to ecological suicide.

Some of these are at best small elements of a much more holistic strategy, meant to buy some time; at worst, they are dangerous diversions and traps that lead us away from more fundamental transformation.

Can AAP do a SYRIZA?

Notwithstanding the obvious political ideological differences between the two parties, one can see some similarities too. For instance, the participation of (and recruitment of cadre from) people's movements in making AAP a force to contend with, has parallels in some of the constituents of SYRIZA; the focus on direct democracy and the public control of essential services are planks for both.

But if AAP (or any other such political unit) aims to become a national party that can meaningfully challenge the entrenched mainstream political parties and also set a progressive agenda, it will need a coherent vision that integrates justice, sustainability, equity, and a concrete agenda for employment and poverty eradication.

[AAPs manifesto](#) for the national elections showed some, but only some, glimpses of this; and unfortunately a set of policy documents prepared by civil society for it remains on its office shelves. Any such political formation also needs slow and steady work towards building a mass membership that is empowered with such a vision (and is not simply a cadre in the orthodox leftist fashion), which can happen only if mass resistance and rights movements are brought together in some form.

The party needs to realise that long-lasting change will only occur if rural and urban communities are facilitated and capacitated to take charge of decision-making and their own localised economies, rather than concentrate power in the state (a point also made by observers of the Greek events, for instance [here](#)). It needs to show that all this will be relevant to the middle classes and the youth, even as it targets the rich and elite with measures aimed at redistribution of wealth and power.

Tall order, indeed. But in the next few pieces of this column, I will try to indicate some directions and examples of things happening, or on the verge of happening, which indicate that such a transformation is by no means impossible, especially if we don't expect overnight miracles. It will also be instructive to see what happens if AAP comes to power in Delhi; its [70-point programme](#) for the city has a lot of promise.

And in case you've reached here and are still wondering about the title of this essay: the word 'krisis' (from 'krinein') in Greek means a judgement, a decision. Its usage can be extended to mean transformations in systems or societies that were becoming defunct or severely problematic. Its derived term, 'crisis', has unfortunately come to be overwhelmingly negative.

But as we head towards greater ecological collapse, social conflicts, unemployment, and so on, we should consider these as opportunities for fundamental or radical ('going to the roots', this one from Latin's *radix*) change. This could be the main lesson we learn from the ongoing Greek upheaval.

REFERENCES

1. [Revolution News: Transforming crisis to krisis](#)
2. [Greece's solidarity movement: 'It's a whole new model – and it's working'](#)

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<http://indiatogether.org/can-syriza-win-in-greece-inspire-india-and-aap-op-ed>

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