

The Riots of December 2008: their Causes in Historical and International Contexts

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The riots of December 2008 were initially provoked by the killing of a schoolchild, but had wider motives. Most rioters were students or schoolchildren; while the destruction was perpetrated mainly by self-styled anarchists and revolutionaries. For the most part, their attitudes and behaviour patterns can be dated from 1974 and were now unique to Greece. The young were experienced in protesting against a poor educational system, lack of job prospects and political corruption.

Anarchists and revolutionaries flourished in a society which had good cause to be disrespectful of governmental authority. Both groups confronted a discredited and inefficient police force.

Introduction

For over two weeks before Christmas Day 2008, television screens around the world were filled with lurid pictures of large crowds in most Greek cities, attacking riot police with rocks and Molotov cocktails, and wrecking shops and banks. In a country characterised by the frequency of violent demonstrations, these were by far the most serious since the establishment of the modern democratic system in 1974. As a youth rebellion — because most of the demonstrators were young — this rivalled in scale and intensity any that occurred in western Europe in the great period of student uprisings in the late 1960s. There were sympathetic demonstrations in at least nine European capitals, and in several other major European cities.

The purpose of this paper is to review the causes of these incidents, by placing them in historical and international contexts. It will be argued that they were the outcome of attitudes and behaviour patterns which, for the most part, dated from 1974 and were now unique to Greece.

The killing of Alexis Grigoropoulos

The incident that sparked the riots was so provocative that it would undoubtedly have caused an explosion in any western European country at any time in recent history.

On the night of 6 December, a police officer, Epaminondas Korkoneas, shot dead a 15-year-old boy before witnesses in the Athens district of Exarchia. The circumstances — as generally accepted — were as follows (*Amnesty International Report*, p. 6; several reports in *Kathimerini*).

The officer had been verbally abused by a group of youths earlier in the evening; and was then ordered by headquarters to leave the area. Disobeying the order, he sought out and confronted the group again, whereupon he and a colleague were assailed with nothing worse than words. Korkoneas fired a bullet which initially ricocheted, but from a point on the ground near the boy. In its provocative nature, a parallel was the killing in West Berlin, in June 1967, by a police officer (who turned out much later to be an undercover agent of the East German regime) of a peacefully demonstrating student, Benno Ohnesorg, so beginning a prolonged series in West Germany of nation-wide rebellions by university students and terrorist acts by revolutionary groups. The previous killing of a youngster by police in Greece, in November 1985, had provoked a retaliatory attack a few days later by a terrorist group on a police bus, which killed one police officer and seriously wounded three others.

Korkoneas was a member of the Special Guard, a police unit less trained in the use of firearms than the rest of the police, and already seen by headquarters as a problem (*To Vima*, 21 December 2008:A16, V. G. Lambropoulos; *To Vima*, 4 January, 2009:A38, anon.). He had been serving for eight years in Exarchia, a Bohemian quarter of Athens, which was the favoured haunt of self-styled anarchists who habitually abused and attacked the police. So Korkoneas must have endured plenty of provocation and was probably overdue for a transfer. He saw himself anyway as a tough guy, and was clearly the wrong sort of character to be a police officer. An ex-paratrooper, he claimed that his family came from Mani, a rocky peninsula whose inhabitants were renowned for their pugnacity and authoritarian views (*To Vima*, 14 December 2008:A13, Eleftheria Kollia).

The victim, Alexis Grigoropoulos, was the son of well-to-do parents and attended a select private school. His school principal told a television interviewer later (SBS Television, *Dateline*, 30 June 2009) that he had not been distinguished by wild behaviour; nor was it remarkable that someone of his age should abuse police in Exarchia.

The chief of police, the prime minister and the president of the republic quickly condemned Korkoneas' action and expressed sorrow to the victim's family. Korkoneas himself was soon arrested and charged with manslaughter. The charge was later changed to one of premeditated murder, of which he was eventually found guilty, in October 2010, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

These gestures made no noticeable impression on protestors. Angry demonstrations started within 90 minutes of the killing. Convened by text messages and the Internet, the demonstrations continued daily for about two weeks, and then frequently for several more days. Most of the demonstrators were schoolchildren or students. A quite separate group, which participated in looting, consisted of immigrants, presumably coming from an inner-city ghetto of central Athens. As a result of their poverty,

complete neglect by the government, and frequent victimisation by the police, many had turned to small-scale street crime. There was a growing alignment between them and anarchists, in reaction against the xenophobic and militant Golden Dawn (Χρυσή Αυγή) movement (*Kathimerini*, 5 February 2008, Pantelis Boukalas; *Kathimerini*, 12 September 2008; Pagoulatos in Economides and Monastiriotis: 48).

Other protestors consisted of self-styled anarchists or revolutionaries, of whom (according to police), there were 800 active in Athens, and 2,200 in other towns (although the rounded total of 3,000 makes this precision suspect). The police claimed to know who nearly all were, and said that they were drawn from all social strata, and had coordinated their activities in the past few years with text messages on mobile phones (*To Vima*, 14 December 2008:A9, V. G. Lambropoulos). Mainly because of the extremists' activities, the demonstrations resulted in immense destruction in nearly all larger towns. Several hundred shops were destroyed; several university premises were vandalised; and the Library of European Law of the University of Athens was destroyed by fire. Around the middle of the month, many hundreds of schools and university faculties were occupied by schoolchildren and students.

During December, the cabinet met daily, but was manifestly helpless. At first, it ordered the police to remain passive so as to avoid provocation. In many towns, shopkeepers were compelled by police passivity to organise their own defence against protestors who travelled between towns by bus. On university campuses, the academic authorities preferred to organise their own defence rather than take the provocative step of summoning the police, even against destructive protestors obviously unconnected with academic life (*To Vima*, 21 December 2008:A13, Marnys Papamathaïou).

Throughout the following year, with gradually declining frequency, there occurred destructive rampages against symbols of wealth by people wearing hooded jackets (*koukoulofori*) and by anarchists. In addition, there were bomb attacks on banks and government buildings by tiny terrorist groups. On at least four occasions, police officers themselves were shot at, sometimes by self-styled revolutionaries, and sometimes by common criminals. Several were critically wounded by these attacks, and two were killed including one who was protecting a witness in the trial of a terrorist.

The attitude of youth to government

The motives of the youthful demonstrators can be gathered from the assertions of some of their spokespeople, and the comments of observers. Although initially motivated by fury over the killing, the demonstrators were increasingly motivated in time by anger at the entire system of government. In reply to a national poll of 2,123 adults in the period 17–23 December 2008, 55% agreed that the demonstrations were “a genuine protest against the crisis — political, social, economic — in which our country finds itself” (*To Vima*, 4 January 2009:A10–11). The motives considered prominent (in order of importance) were: fear of unemployment, lack of role models and ideals,

problems in the educational system, and the lack of recognition of talent in personal and professional development.

Their anger can be attributed largely to the wretched quality of the state educational system in which the great majority were enrolled. Public expenditure on education had, since at least as early as the 1960s, been extraordinarily low by the standards of developed countries; while the participation rate in the higher tiers of the educational system had become comparatively high by international standards since their explosive growth from the 1980s onwards. Surveys over many years of students and schoolchildren showed the majority to be discontented with the quality of education, and particularly angry with its failure to provide them with good jobs. The extraordinarily high proportion — generally accepted as the highest in the world — of students who were enrolled in foreign universities and studying abroad, has for many years, been proof of the thirst for education in Greece, and the low opinion that Greeks hold of their higher education system.

Campaigns by youth, and by the left-wing parties, for greater expenditure on public education were a perennial feature of Greek politics. They had, for many years, formed part of the “Unrelenting Struggle” against a conservative establishment, led by the first George Papandreou, in the early 1960s. The problem of unemployment among graduates of tertiary and secondary education was not unique to Greece. It existed also in Italy, Spain and France; but in Greece it was especially severe because there was no unemployment benefit for first-time job seekers, and the level of benefit for the rest of the unemployed was extremely low.

Successive reports and commentaries on the educational system at school and university level condemned its reliance on rote learning, and its failure to allow initiative by the teachers or participation by the students (Dafermos in Economides and Monastiriotes, eds: 10). The degree of ministerial control over secondary and tertiary education was extraordinarily far-reaching, and was generally agreed to be too subject to partisan influence and changing ministerial decisions. The pressure on schoolchildren of rote-learning and examinations was clearly excessive, and enough in itself to explain frequent outbreaks of protest. Oppressive authority, inefficiently exercised, was guaranteed to breed revolt by the young.

There were further reasons for the chronic restiveness of the young. Political parties were active and influential among students, and to a certain extent, even among schoolchildren. The tradition of 17 November 1973 — when troops under orders from a dictatorship stormed the Polytechnic Institute while occupied by students — sanctified student rebellion. 17 November, soon afterwards, became the Bastille Day of modern Greek democracy, and became such as a result of student initiative.

Some recent developments had strengthened the cynicism and anger of youth. The government aroused fears that it would restrict access to higher education, particularly by introducing the requirement, in 2006, that students attain at least 50% in the national and government-run examinations for entrance to university. In December 2008, the government was preparing to recognise the degrees granted by

private colleges affiliated to foreign universities, so arousing fears that Greek tertiary education would be still further neglected. Schoolchildren and students had, in the previous three years, repeatedly protested against the government's reforms by mass occupations of educational institutions and street demonstrations. They acquired sophisticated skills in organising such protests on a national scale, skills which they demonstrated in December 2008. One example was the coordination of attacks on about 45 police stations all over the country (Gavriilides in Economides and Monastiriotes, eds: 15).

The likelihood that unemployment would increase as a result of the global financial crisis (which had started in the United States a year earlier) heightened young people's anxiety about their job prospects. The prospect of recession was especially provocative because it followed thirteen years of strong economic growth (1995–2008) and rising economic expectations. Even during this period, Greek attitudes to the state of the economy (as revealed by successive Eurobarometer polls) were characterised by a remarkably high level of pessimism and insecurity, which can be attributed to persistently high inflation and unemployment, and the persistently high government budget deficit and public debt. This was accompanied by a chronic and worsening crisis of the social security funds on which most of the population depended for health insurance and pensions.

The global financial crisis made militant anti-capitalist groups more assertive, and readier to take advantage of student protests. Because it had continued, since 2004, the profligate habits of its predecessors, the New Democracy government denied itself now the option of spending to combat looming recession. Instead, it found itself under irresistible pressure from other eurozone governments to cut expenditure, and accordingly had, in November, introduced an unpopular austerity budget, which worsened the prevalent gloom (*To Vima*, 30 November 2008:A6, Dimitra Kroustalli).

Although it is often said that growing social inequality during the long period of prosperity fuelled youth anger, there seems to be no evidence that inequality had grown. The academic economist, George Pagoulatos, contradicts himself on this point (Economides and Monastiriotes, eds: 47). There is however much evidence that it had for a long time been high by the standards of western Europe. Moreover, the Greek public was keenly aware of this fact. The recent increase in affluence was provocative to the large white-collar proletariat — the so-called “700 euro” generation, referring to their monthly income — produced by the educational system. These people were especially angered by the belief that personal connections and political influence had an excessive influence on graduates' job prospects (Zeri in Economides and Monastiriotes, eds: 71).

As in other countries afflicted by the global financial crisis, the public became more readily angered by political corruption. At least three cases of government corruption had been very much in the news in recent months. Their relevance is illustrated by the report that a teenager had been seen kicking the wheel of a garbage

truck shouting “Take that, Ephraim!”¹ before setting it alight with a petrol bomb (*Kathimerini*, 5 June 2009, Paschos Mandravelis).

The traditional abuse of appointments to the public administration for purposes of political patronage was so serious that it resulted in a generally low level of governmental efficiency. This provoked a chronic crisis of confidence in government, which tended over time to intensify as the obligations of government to provide a decent educational, health and welfare system increased. Inefficient government also weakened the country’s economic competitiveness in various ways. Recent opinion polls showed extraordinarily high levels — the highest or almost the highest among the 27 European Union countries — of concern about corruption, and cynicism about many political institutions — especially political parties, the police, judiciary, health and educational systems (*Special Eurobarometer*, 291, April 2008; *Standard Eurobarometer*, 69, Spring 2008; *To Vima*, 4 January 2009:A6–7, Dimitra Kroustalli, summary of opinion polls about public attitudes in 2008). These feelings were accompanied, as already mentioned, by economic anxiety. Among young people worried about their job prospects, this mixture of attitudes was of course explosive.

The party in power, New Democracy, must bear special responsibility for provoking this cynicism. It had come to power in March 2004 with a resounding and often-repeated promise to “reinvent the state” — meaning specifically, to purge it of corruption, free it from party control, and improve its efficiency. These were indeed urgently necessary tasks. Yet on coming to power the party largely ignored them. Instead, it devoted itself with much energy to the very clientelistic practices that it had been condemning, so as to compensate itself for its many years of exclusion from the spoils of office (Close, 2009:285–89). The affability and communication skills of the prime minister, Kostas Karamanlis made him popular for a long time. However, such skills began to lose their appeal as the public became aware of his lethargy.

In 2008, a series of scandals revealed the government’s abject failure to reinvent the state. Largely because of its lack of resolve to combat the scandals, the government lost its lead in opinion polls, although the main opposition party, PASOK, did not inspire confidence either (*Athens News*, 10 April 2009, John Psaropoulos; *Athens News*, 15 May 2009, George Gilson).

The weaknesses of the police

Ever since 1974, the police had exhibited in extreme form the weakness of the public administration. Their sense of commitment to their job of upholding the law was notoriously low, and their pay was said to be poor even by public service standards (*Athens News*, 10 April 2009, Kathy Tzilivakis). Korkoneas’ behaviour was symptomatic of their lack of training. In its annual report for 2008, the Citizens’ Advocate (or Ombudsman) commented that “abuses by the police of the pretext of public security to

¹ Ephraim was the abbot of a monastery implicated in one of the scandals.

arrest, detain and search people have continued with undiminished frequency” (48). On the other hand, attacks on police and on police property had also been common and had apparently increased in recent years, especially in Exarchia (*Athens Plus*, 12 December 2008:4, Nikos Konstandaras).

Meanwhile the timidity which the police had commonly shown in confronting violent crowds was due to their lack of support by the public and by politicians. The police did not dare take strong action against any but defenceless groups, such as immigrants, for fear of condemnation by politicians and the media. Those whom they charged with any offence — even an ordinary traffic infringement — might appeal with success to some friendly politician for protection (*Kathimerini*, 7 September 2009, Nikos Konstandaras).

Public respect for and trust in the police had, since 1974, been extraordinarily low by international standards. For example, a survey in 2004–05 of 32 countries, which asked people how satisfied they were with the response when they reported crimes to the police, found Greeks to be the least satisfied (*International Victims of Crime Survey*, 2008:32). Another recent survey concluded, after careful analysis, that the public saw the police as typifying the weaknesses of the public service generally — inefficiency, inertia, corruption, political interference, lack of planning or resources — and was no longer much influenced by historical memories of police oppression before 1974 (Βερναδάκης, 2002:309; *To Vima*, 10 May 2009:A30, K. Chatzidis). The failure of the police to protect citizens from common crimes such as theft was prominent among the grievances that citizens held against the state.

Yet public attitudes were ambivalent. Improving the efficiency of the police meant strengthening its powers and authority, and the latter was not a popular cause — a fact which explains politicians’ reluctance to take it up.

The prevalence of anti-authoritarian views, and their own discredit, deprived the police of informants against revolutionary law-breakers, and of the power to protect witnesses. Even when they possessed evidence of wrongdoing, police were sometimes afraid to act. In recent years it was repeatedly alleged by police authorities that their officers feared to testify against anarchists guilty of attacks on property or against soccer hooligans (*Kathimerini*, 23 January 2007; Chief of Police, quoted by Mark Dragoumis in *Athens News*, 23 February 2007; *Kathimerini*, 5 May 2007, complaint by Minister of Public Order). On some occasions, which were not infrequent, corrupt officers leaked information to criminals or concealed their activities (*Athens News*, 23 February 2007, Mark Dragoumis; *To Vima*, 21 September 2003:A34, V. G. Lambropoulos; *To Vima*, 10 May 2009:A30, K. Ch. Chatzidis).

Another example of the prevalence of anti-authoritarian views was the tolerance, by governments and university authorities, of the abuse of university asylum by anarchists, who periodically caused serious disruption of universities and damage to their property.

This takes us to the general distrust of and disrespect for authority, which have characterised society ever since 1974. At the judicial level, this was illustrated by the

reluctance of the judiciary to authorise the use of CCTV cameras for anything except traffic control, except under tight restrictions. Even traffic cameras were liable to be vandalised with impunity (*Kathimerini*, 11 May 2009). At a popular level, the fate of the Pegasus police unit a few years ago is instructive. Formed in order to improve control of traffic — something desperately needed — it proved too successful for its own good. Having soon quadrupled the number of convictions for speeding offences, it provoked a revolt by Athens taxi drivers which compelled its disbandment (*Kathimerini*, 25 April 2009, citing Professor of Criminology, Vassilis Karydis). At the street level, distrust of authority was expressed in the noisy and often violent demonstrations which frequently obstructed traffic in central Athens. In the first half of 2008 — not a particularly tumultuous period — they averaged seven-eight each month (*Kathimerini*, 23 August 2008).

Insulting the police was a pastime with a tradition dating to the downfall of the dictatorship in 1974. But physical assaults on police, and lawless violence generally, seem to have become increasingly frequent in the previous few years. A long-term reason seems to have been the greatly increasing circulation of illegal firearms, and the increasing rate of common crimes.

The efficiency and reputation of the Greek police had always depended heavily on their political leadership. Even more, it seems, than most branches of the public service, the police had always been vulnerable to interference by politicians in appointments, promotions and transfers, and this weakened their discipline. All governments were blamed for this practice. The management of the police by the New Democracy government, since it came to power in 2004, seems to have been particularly weak and inefficient, and was seen as such even by party supporters in 2009. The Minister of Public Order in May 2007, Byron Polydoros, had descended to trading public recriminations with the police officers for whom he was responsible (*Kathimerini*, 5 May 2007; *Kathimerini*, 6 November 2009, anon.; *To Vima*, 21 June 2009, A. Ravanos, Greek Internet edition).

Rebellion against authority had, ever since 1974, been taken to extremes by a few self-styled anarchists, anti-authoritarians and revolutionaries. These, as has been noted, were prominent in the December riots. Destructive rampages by anarchists had been frequent in recent years, although their frequency had been declining before December (*To Vima*, 14 December 2008:A9, V. G. Lambropoulos).

The most deadly of the revolutionary terrorist groups, the “17th November”, had belatedly been crushed by the police, in 2002, after assassinating 23 people since December 1975. The revolutionary terrorists in 2009 (those prepared to plant time bombs and kill police for a revolutionary cause) were considered to number only a handful, although they had managed to recruit from the anarchists. One police estimate put their numbers at only five (*Kathimerini*, 19 July 2009, anon., Greek Internet edition). They were being advised by veterans, according to the police specialists in counter-terrorism who saw a direct line of continuity in personnel, ideas and methods between the terrorists of the 1970s and those of 2009. They were nevertheless more

amateurish in their methods, indiscriminate in their choice of targets, and cruder in ideology than former terrorists (*Kathimerini*, 30 October 2009, Stavros Lygeros, English edition).

The flavour of their ideas is conveyed by slogans painted on a bombed bank in February: “Their wealth is our blood” and “The bank robs you lawfully...” or a public statement the same month “We don’t do politics. We do guerrilla warfare” (*To Vima*, 21 June 2009:A6, V. G. Lambropoulos; *Athens News*, 19 June 2009, anon.). The older terrorist ideology from which these notions derived was in itself a crude and old-fashioned form of Marxism, which saw NATO and the EU as instruments of western capitalism, and the Greek police as agents of the Greek ruling classes.

These attitudes had been found in western Europe in the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, in the Red Brigades in Italy. But they had almost died out except in Greece. According to a survey of 2002, 22% of the Greek public sympathised with these views, although very few sympathised with terrorist methods (*Athens News*, 6 September 2002, Derek Gatopoulos). The views had, in recent years, been stimulated by the international reaction against global capitalism, which grew still further after the financial disasters in the United States, in 2007–08.

The other reasons for the survival of these views in Greece seem to have been varied: the general strength of anti-authoritarian sentiment since 1974; the acceptance by the major parties of an unpopular alliance with the United States through membership of NATO; and the failure of the Greek state to provide an effective welfare safety net which might mitigate the effects of social inequality. Anti-authoritarian views were expressed with particular strength by the far left minor party SYRIZA and by the left wing of PASOK, which viewed anarchist violence with ambivalence or even tolerance (Zeri, in Economides & Monastiriōtis, eds: 70; *Kathimerini*, 3 October 2002). This feeling prevented governments from adopting the tough police measures which had proved effective in Germany and Italy.

Having been in opposition since 2004, PASOK was free to join the parties further left in exploiting popular suspicion of the police against a New Democracy government. This powerful alignment makes it seem doubtful whether any New Democracy government could lead the police successfully against left-wing violence. So it was a blessing for the advocates of law and order that PASOK returned to power in October 2009, whereupon the most successful police minister of recent times, Michalis Chrysochōides — who had presided over the dissolution of “17 November” in 2002 — returned to his old job with zeal to reassert police authority.

Conclusion

In December 2008, even before the riots began, the prevalent public attitude to the political and economic system was characterised by cynicism, pessimism and a great deal of anger. These feelings can be attributed to the extreme weakness of the Greek state, and in particular its educational, police and welfare services. The ultimate causes

of this weakness can, in turn, be found in the prevalent assumption of the political system, that its overriding obligation was to provide abundant, unskilled yet secure jobs on a scale which eclipsed the obligations to provide skilled services and to maintain financial solvency.

The grievances caused by the inefficiencies of the public service had, in the previous thirteen years, been softened by prosperity. But this prosperity had always been accompanied by a widespread resentment of various forms of social inequality, and by a widespread sense of economic insecurity. By December 2008, this prosperity was obviously ending; and the young seemed especially likely to suffer as a result. Their mood was consequently inflammable and was ignited by the killing of Alexis Grigoropoulos.

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