

Greece's Prosecution of Golden Dawn

Origins of Golden Dawn

Golden Dawn exploded on the Greek political scene in 2012, amid the worst economic crisis in post-war history, stunning pollsters, politicians and the public by winning 6.92 percent of the vote and 18 seats in Parliament.

At first blush, it seemed Golden Dawn, with its Nazi rhetoric, swastikas, and black-shirted street thugs, was just a skinhead group taking advantage of economic misery and public anger at the political failure and corruption of all of its recent governments. But Golden Dawn is more than just another neo-Nazi fringe group. Its leadership has direct ideological and personal links to officers in the notorious Greek army units that collaborated with the Nazis during World War II, fought with the British against the Greek communists after 1944, and went on to lead the U.S.-backed military dictatorship that ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974, known as "The Junta" or "The Regime of the Colonels."

Golden Dawn was founded by Nikolaos Michaloliakos, an ultranationalist who was arrested at least twice for political violence and convicted in 1978 in connection with terrorist bombings in Athens.

Michaloliakos launched a weekly magazine called Golden Dawn, which espoused blatantly Nazi ideology. For many years members of the Golden Dawn were bodyguards for businessmen and politicians.

In 1985 Michaloliakos founded the political party Golden Dawn. The party participated in the elections for the first time in 1994 and won less than 1 percent of the vote. Recently, though, fueled by economic collapse, unemployment, and poverty, Golden Dawn has emerged as a potent political force in Greece.

Violent Attacks

Golden Dawn is no ordinary ultra-nationalist party. No other extreme right party in Europe is as stridently racist, nativist and violent, none is so unapologetically antisemitic, and none so openly calls for the overthrow of the State. It seeks to impose its vision of Greek racial superiority across society and has used intimidation and violence to achieve those ends. It attacked migrant, political opponents, doctors and medical facilities, artists, bloggers, teachers, human rights workers, playwrights, and even priests.

In 2013, the Racist Violence Reporting Network (RVRN) recorded 166 incidents involving at least 320 victims. Most victims were immigrants and refugees, including undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and recognized refugees. Most were also Muslim. In many cases, victims were approached and asked to produce identification to show they were legal residents. When they could not, they were assaulted. Most of these attacks occurred in public places by vigilantes in groups of two to twenty. In 15 cases, victims or witnesses said they recognized Golden Dawn members or associates among the perpetrators, or saw the Golden Dawn insignia.

Most worrisome, Golden Dawn's popularity has grown after scores of violent attacks on migrants, dark-skinned Greeks, and even on members of parliament.

Golden Dawn portrays itself as a protector of a Greek traditional morality threatened by Western influences, and is also hostile to LGBT individuals and the community's attempts to secure their civil rights.

The RVRN documented six incidents of attacks based on sexual orientation in 2013, and another 16 victims targeted for their gender identity. Anecdotal reports

suggest that the number of hate crimes targeting LGBT people is higher, and transsexuals are the most vulnerable to attack. NGOs are attempting to better document such cases.

Golden Dawn frequently expresses animosity toward Turkey, Greeks of Turkish origin, and other Muslims, and aspires to see Istanbul, once the Byzantine city of Constantinople, under Greek control again. Golden Dawn M.P.s have deliberately insulted their Muslim colleagues, and people who appear to be from Muslim-majority countries have been targeted for attacks.

In addition to at least two murders, Golden Dawn members or supporters are accused of torturing an Egyptian immigrant, biting off the ear of an Iranian refugee, carving the Golden Dawn initials into a Somali man's back, and burning down a house inhabited by poor Egyptian fishermen. One victim was a nine-year-old boy. Even worse, for more than four years they did it with relative impunity, and in some cases with the cooperation of the police.

Golden Dawn violence is not limited to migrants and "foreigners." It has attacked health workers and artists in the name of "protecting" Greek values. On April 4, 2014 Golden Dawn supporters once again attacked a free clinic run by Doctors of the World in Perama, on the outskirts of Athens. The group's free clinics have attracted many migrants who have been victims of racist violence, who need medical treatment but fear arrest and deportation if they go to public hospitals. Golden Dawn leaders have also used Greek blasphemy laws to attack its cultural opponents and to imply that only Golden Dawn can defend the Greek Church against an onslaught of corrupt, Westernized values.

A defector from Golden Dawn, and a witness in the criminal case, said that Golden Dawn do not fear law enforcement. "The police couldn't touch us," he said, then corrected himself. "The police had specific orders not to touch us." Once, when four Golden Dawn members attacked two Pakistani migrants and beat them "really,

really badly," he received a phone call from the police chief who had ties to the local Golden Dawn boss and told him the case would not be investigated. Once they realized they could operate with impunity, they turned to intimidation for profit, evicting recalcitrant tenants and collecting debts. According to an investigation by the Internal Affairs Department of the Greek Police, police involvement in racist attacks rose sharply between 2009 and October 2013, with the peak in 2012. In all, 203 police officers and 3 civilians were involved in incidents of racist violence. In June 2012, as reports piled up of police standing by during Golden Dawn attacks, a study of voting behavior indicated that a community heavily populated with Athens police officers had voted disproportionately for Golden Dawn.

Antisemitism

Golden Dawn's antisemitic vitriol, Holocaust denial, and glorification of Adolf Hitler have been well documented. Michaloliakos has publicly denied the Holocaust and Golden Dawn M.P. Ilias Kasidiaris read from the Protocols of the Elders of Zion on the floor of the Parliament. While Golden Dawn's leaders insist they will not recreate the Holocaust against Jews, and there are no proven Golden Dawn-related physical attacks on Jews or Jewish community property, some party officials have threatened to establish crematoria for migrants (while insisting that there were no Nazi-run crematoria). The case against Golden Dawn has not appeared to quell other antisemitic incidents—although the government has now begun to enforce bans on hate speech under a recently modified anti-racism law.

Every April 20th, Golden Dawn, like other European Nazi parties, meets to commemorate Adolf Hitler's birthday.

Xenophobia

While Michaloliakos' unadulterated Nazism and adoration of Adolf Hitler were considered extreme, the nationalist, antisemitic and Greek supremacist ideas he expressed were more widely held. Opinion polls conducted in the 1980s—well before the arrival of waves of immigrants—

showed a high level of xenophobia. In the early 1990s, Golden Dawn benefited from a sharp rise in xenophobic sentiment triggered by the arrival of large numbers of Albanians, and a rise in petty crime. It joined in the Greek nationalist outrage that flared up in 1992 when the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia became independent and decided to name itself Macedonia (the same name as the Greek province). In 2012, Golden Dawn leaders were still ranting against Macedonia from the floor of Parliament.

Golden Dawn explicitly wants to “cleanse” the country of migrants, especially those with dark skin. However, new arrivals were not the only “foreigners” targeted by Golden Dawn; it is also accused of attacks on Roma citizens, dark-skinned Greeks, and members of the Muslim community in Thrace—groups that have always been in Greece. In 2009 Golden Dawn chased about 600 Somali migrants out of the building they were occupying and beat them. No charges were filed. Golden Dawn spokesperson Kasidiaris called Roma “human garbage” during a public anti-Roma meeting in Aspropyrgos in May, 2011. Upon entering Parliament, Golden Dawn lawmakers continued to spout slurs, without reprimand.

Arrests and Prosecution

The state’s current case against Golden Dawn’s leaders includes ordering about a dozen violent racist attacks. After years of tolerance and indifference, Greek authorities swung into action following the murder of anti-fascist musician Pavlos Fyssas on September 17, 2013. Fyssas was stabbed, and as he lay dying, he pointed out his attacker to police who had rushed to the scene. The alleged perpetrator was arrested, and turned out to have worked in the cafeteria at Golden Dawn headquarters. He reportedly visited the Golden Dawn branch in the Keratsini neighborhood where Fyssas was murdered several times a week.

The Greek public exploded, with a night of fierce protests against Golden Dawn and police inaction, followed by anti-fascist demonstrations that drew 50,000 people into the

streets of Athens. Politicians from across the political spectrum condemned the murder—even Michaloliakos, who said Golden Dawn had had nothing to do with it. The Greek President, Karolos Papoulias, warned: “It is our duty not to allow any space whatsoever to fascism—not even an inch.”

Greek law does not permit the banning of political parties based on their ideas, so the authorities have pursued a different and potentially more far-reaching and effective approach to Golden Dawn, which focuses on the criminal activities of the organization. Following the Fyssas murder, police arrested at least 20 Golden Dawn leaders and other suspects, including Michaloliakos, and two special magistrates were put in charge of building a case against the party’s leaders and members for “ordering and directing a criminal organization.” The crimes include murder, racist and many other violent attacks, and weapons violations.

As the investigation proceeded, the magistrates asked Parliament to strip immunity from the 18 Golden Dawn lawmakers so that they could be questioned. All are charged with running a criminal organization. The senior leaders deny all charges. Other members of the party have turned state’s evidence, and some of their testimonies have leaked to the media, as have some of the photographs seized from the leaders’ houses and computers. Even while the top leadership of the party sits in jail, people known to be witnesses in the Golden Dawn trial have received death threats.

The government has stated that it will attempt to prove, among other allegations, that Golden Dawn members were required to participate in violent attacks as a condition of promotion. Leaked testimony from a key witness in the case confirmed earlier reports that members were videotaped committing illegal acts for blackmail in the event that they attempted to break their lifetime vow of loyalty. Greek officials are also investigating the sources of the unreported funding that allowed Golden Dawn to run 70 offices and distribute food to the poor (but only after inspecting identity cards to

confirm their Greek citizenship). In the fall of 2013 Greek parliament decided that public funding for a political party may be suspended if its leaders or 10 percent of its members are charged with involvement in a criminal organization or acts of terrorism. If they are convicted, public funding may be terminated; if not, it must be paid back. Parliament cut funding to Golden Dawn in October 2013.

The arrests do not seem to have dampened support for Golden Dawn as much as might be hoped, and the party remains a stubborn force in the Greek political scene.

In May 2014 the party gained three seats in the European Parliament after winning nearly 10 percent of the vote. Golden Dawn recruited two former Greek generals to run on its ticket.

In the January 2015 national elections, Golden Dawn received the third highest percentage of the vote, at 6.3 percent. Seventeen Golden Dawn MP's were elected, down only one from the 2012 elections, and at least 13 of the 18 MP's charged with crimes were reelected.

While Greek prosecutors have been trying to prove that Golden Dawn leaders were running a criminal organization, the police have embarked on several efforts to purge themselves of officers who ignored Golden Dawn while it committed a wave of assaults and other crimes and those who participated in its abuse of migrants. At least 203 officers have been identified and some 30 prosecutions against police officers are ongoing.

By August, 2014, 78 defendants had been charged in connection with Golden Dawn, and 30 were in pretrial custody. At least five witnesses, all Greek citizens, had entered the witness protection program. Many others are not Greek citizens, but are willing to testify, and have come to Athens without police protection and at their own expense. They are particularly vulnerable. Judicial officials and their families have received death threats, including two bullets enclosed in a threatening letter mailed to the lead prosecutor of the Supreme Court, who had appointed the two magistrates. Golden Dawn has a history of public

intimidation in and outside courtrooms. While officials are concerned about the potential for retaliation against witnesses, even years after the proceedings are concluded, non-Greeks are not eligible for witness protection programs.

The prosecution will attempt to prove that Golden Dawn consisted of about 1,000 core cadres and about 300 to 400 junior members, divided into cells of four or five in all parts of Greece. Young members were invited to participate in "an atrocity"—typically beating up migrants, but crimes also include murder and weapons charges—and those who proved themselves and advanced in the organization went to training camps, where they were indoctrinated and initiated in a ceremony that appears to have elements of Hellenic mythology and Nazi ideology. Leaders were referred to with military titles and Michaloliakos was known as "the Fuhrer," to whom all members swore a loyalty oath for life. Cadres were taught to sing the Nazi anthem with Greek lyrics—a skill they demonstrated in a defiant rally in front of the Greek Parliament building on the day that the legislature voted to lift Michaloliakos' parliamentary immunity so he could be questioned by prosecutors.

Because Greek law states that individuals cannot be held in pre-trial detention for more than 18 months, several Golden Dawn members were released in March 2015 and placed under house arrest. In February, a Court of Appeals Judicial Council referred 70 of the defendants for prosecution. The trial is scheduled to begin on April 20.

To be credible, however, the prosecution must be conducted according to stringent human rights and legal standards for the accused. Golden Dawn has already appealed its case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. It is critical that Greek authorities avoid legal or procedural errors that could lead to the case being overturned on appeal.