

Public support for prison protests

Greece in the Spotlight

Leonidas Cheliotis and Sappho Xenakis

Could a new dawn be breaking in penal sensibilities? Perhaps, and the current source of such momentum seems to be Greece. An unlikely source, indeed, for Greece has been repeatedly chastised in recent years both by NGO's and other EU member states for its treatment of detainees. Unlikely, too, because Greece tends to be a follower rather than a leader of international politics and policy. Not to mention the bleak diagnoses of a politically apathetic public, and youth in particular.

Greece has experienced a steep rise in its prison population over the last twenty years, a disproportionate number of which have been foreigners. For over two weeks now, nearly 6,000 prisoners –half of the prison population in Greece today– have been on hunger strike. The protest is directed against the excessive use of remand custody, the unfair administration of parole and temporary release, abusive prison staff, overcrowded and degrading conditions, and inadequate medical provision, to name but a few of the grievances. During this time, two prisoner deaths have been reported, one attempted suicide, whilst tens of others have sewn their lips together.

Such protests are not unique to Greece, of course. What is new is the degree of support the prisoners' struggle has attracted amongst the Greek public, xenophobic and crime-fearing as it has often been portrayed to be. Whilst the majority might not sympathise with the protesters, at least not openly, a significant minority clearly do. With marches and motorbike rallies through city centres, demonstrations outside prisons, open-air concerts featuring well-known Greek artists, and internet blogging, supporters have been joining prisoners in calling not only for reforms, but also for the eventual abolition of prisons.

This is more than a simple fringe movement. The 'Campaign for Prisoners' Rights' (*Protovoulia gia ta Dikaiomata ton Kratoumenon*), the central mobilising organisation of public support for prisoners, has been mediating between the Ministry of Justice and protesting prisoners (the Ministry is refusing to meet with the representative committee elected by prisoners themselves).

Activism of this kind appears to be spreading. One year ago, Italian prisoners on hunger strike received similar expressions of support from the outside, and may well expect the same during their protests planned for this December.

All this comes at a time when the British public is being encouraged to adopt a more punitive approach to prisoners, with Jack Straw recently proclaiming the need to end 'cushy' prison conditions. Could prisoners in Britain hope for the sort of public sympathy and activism demonstrated elsewhere in Europe?

Leonidas Cheliotis is Lecturer and Deputy Director of the Centre for Criminal Justice, School of Law, Queen Mary, University of London.

Sappho Xenakis is Fellow in International Relations at the Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science.