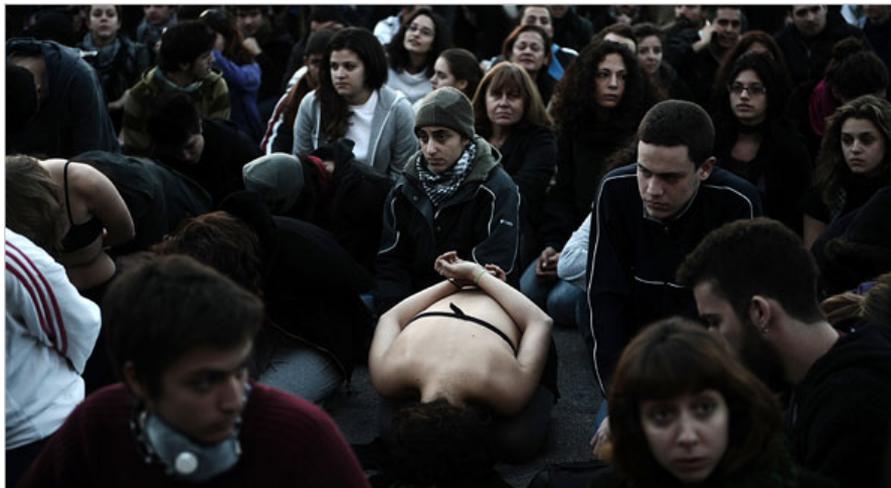


University in Athens, epicenter of riots, is drawing a potent mix of radicals

Rachel Donadio



Olivier Laban-Mattei/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Young demonstrators, many of them college students, in front of riot control officers on Saturday near the Parliament.

Early Saturday morning inside the gates of Athens Polytechnic, a dozen groggy young people in hooded sweatshirts slumped on folding chairs around a smoky fire. Others trickled in, holding cups of coffee. Gypsy children scampered around with wheelbarrows, collecting empty beer bottles. One child lit a cigarette.

But the young people were not recovering from a long night of drinking or studying. They were preparing for revolution.

Many of the violent protests that have rocked Athens in recent days, since a 15-year-old was killed by a police bullet on Dec. 6, have taken place in and around the school, driven by a group of anarchists who have often occupied the buildings here.

Come sundown on many nights, the Polytechnic, three graffiti-covered neoclassical buildings set amid pine trees, became an apocalyptic scene. Garbage fires burned in its front courtyard. On nearby streets, youths throwing gasoline bombs and rocks clashed with riot police officers armed with tear gas. The hulks of burned-out cars lay like carcasses in the streets.

Someone spray-painted "Don't blame us, the rocks ricocheted" on a wall — a reference to a statement by the lawyer for the policeman who killed the teenager, who said the bullet did not hit the boy directly.

The National Technical University of Athens, as the Polytechnic is officially called, is one of Greece's leading universities, training engineers, architects and scientists since 1836. It moved its main campus outside the city center in the 1980s, leaving its downtown buildings, which now house just the architecture and engineering departments and an auditorium, largely to the whims of protest groups.

The university administration has tended to view the demonstrators as uninvited houseguests who overstayed their welcome so long ago that they have become fixtures.

But these protests have been different. "In former times, a couple of years ago, there were only students protesting," said Konstantinos Moutzouris, the rector of the Polytechnic. "This time there are all kinds of groups — this is difficult to control."

Conversations with those inside the Polytechnic revealed a mix of students, older anarchists and immigrants protesting everything from police brutality to globalization to American

imperialism. Some are simply thrill-seekers along for the ride. Mr. Moutzouris estimated that there were 50 protesters taking refuge inside the gates, joined by hundreds of others each evening.

Under an asylum law instituted after the police crushed a student rebellion at the Polytechnic against the military junta in 1973, the Greek police are not allowed on universities' property unless requested by administrators.

Tensions between the police and protesters are so high that Mr. Moutzouris said asking the police to intervene would cause even more disorder. "We're not in the mood of inviting them," he said. "I think we would have damages and even some people hurt."

He said the architecture and engineering faculty planned to meet with protesters Monday to urge them to leave.

Greece has endured a steady level of political violence for decades. Starting in the mid-1970s, the terrorist group November 17 — named for the date of the 1973 Polytechnic crackdown — killed at least 23 people in several attacks until the Greek authorities largely dismantled it before the 2004 Athens Olympics.

Last year, another group fired a rocket-propelled grenade at the United States Embassy here, causing damage but no injuries.

Adding to the tensions, the police are seen here as both overly aggressive and disconcertingly passive. Though the latest violence was sparked by a police bullet, the government told the police not to use force to tamp down the protests, to avoid further mayhem. The cost of the ensuing riots is estimated at \$1.3 billion nationwide.

That the authorities have not identified and arrested the protest ringleaders also seems a question of political will.

Outside the university gates on Saturday morning, merchants were sweeping up broken glass from their vandalized shops. Asked what the stores and their owners had to do with the death of the teenager, one black-clad young woman at the university who declined to give her name said they represented "the corporate machine."

Protesters have said that they will continue to demonstrate until the officer charged with killing the teenager, Alexandros Grigoropoulos, is tried and jailed.

The young woman said the anarchists held "collective meetings" in the university auditorium. They also organize through text-message chains and on Web sites like indymedia.org.

Greek authorities have insisted that the violence has been driven by a radical handful, whom they refer to as "the known unknown."

That term is "nonsense," said Dimitris Liberopoulos, 44, a freelance book editor and anarchist sympathizer who discussed the protest movement over coffee in Exarchia, the neighborhood surrounding the university. "It's a game of semiotics."

He said that the authorities did not know who the protesters were and did not understand their frustration at class division, the poor economy, a broken education system and a corrupt government.

It is unclear whether the anarchists have ties with terrorist groups. But security experts fear that terrorists might see the new unrest as fertile ground for attacks. They also worry that the anarchists themselves might up the ante.

Though Athens was largely calm on Sunday, more protests are expected this week.

"There's a proverb," Mr. Liberopoulos said, "that a civil war never ends."

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