

2007 in Greece: Paving the Way for a Major Political Realignment

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When future historians come to write the history of modern Greek politics, the developments of 2007 may be recognized as the spark that ignited the most significant major political changes since the 1974 fall of the Dictatorship (*Metapolitefsi*). These developments appear to increase the challenge posed to the established political and party alignments. These alignments have been expressed within a two-party-plus system, where governments implemented major, hegemonic political projects, which proved crucial to the country's development. Thus, it was the conservatives of the New Democracy Party (ND) that dominated the delicate transition to democracy in the mid-1970s, the radicalism of the 'change' of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) in the 1980s and, after a short interlude of weak governments, the New PASOK that dominated the political scene with its modernizing project of more than 10 years, which led Greece into the Eurozone. Until the 2004 March elections, when the revamped ND, under the leadership of Kostas Karamanlis, nephew of the party's founder Konstantine Karamanlis, came to power on a platform that promised to overturn the corrupt patterns of the Greek Socialists and to make extensive 'reforms', these two parties dominated Greek politics. The parliamentary presence of other parties, which were primarily on the left, was limited and at times symbolic. However, as of last year's election, this pattern appears to be changing.

2007 was supposed to be a very promising year for the governing ND. Emerging from a rather good performance during the autumn 2006 municipal and regional elections, the Karamanlis government seemed

ready to leave behind its political strategy of 'blaming everything on PASOK' and finally to implement its program. However, it proved a rather disappointing year for the Government. After it had achieved power on a promise to eliminate corruption, and with an ethical and political condemnation of the partitocrazia of public life, one could not have anticipated the series of events that were to jeopardize this promise in a most vivid fashion.

Incompetence and Corruption

The Government's most significant actions and initiatives during last year's administration revealed a striking incompetence and/or corruption. The failure to contain the mass student movement within the framework of the rule of law, the striking police brutality and misuse of power against immigrants (March), the tragic incapacity of the state authorities to respond to emergencies, such as the twelve missing persons in the Peloponnesian mountains (May) or the sinking of the cruiser "Sea Diamond" at the port of Santorini with unmeasured ecological consequences (April), and finally the pathetic failure of the government to prevent or simply to put out the summer fires which cost the lives of over 70 people and nearly destroyed the archaeological site in Olympia (July, August) gradually challenged the government's political strategy of 'blaming everything on PASOK'. The government's inability to deal with the everyday life of citizens, and to provide them with security and respect for the law, had started to become striking.

Moreover the Governing party's failure to implement its program and maintain the profile of a moderate non-nationalist, cosmopolitan, rational and law-abiding political force exacerbated its above-mentioned incompetence. The reform of the Constitution held a prominent place in ND's electoral platform. The sym-

bol of this Constitutional reform was the revision of the article prohibiting the functioning of private universities in the country. Although the majority of PASOK, the leading opposition party, had agreed on this reform, a large popular backlash forced it to be dropped from the Constitutional reform, which led to the termination of the entire process.

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Other major reform promises were the 're-establishment of the state', which basically meant a radical restructuring of the poorly functioning civil service, the 'rationalisation' of the pension plans and extensive reforms in the country's university system based on a new and state-controlled system of evaluation. The last was introduced in a way that led to reactions from both the student and the academic community. The government retreated temporarily and finally introduced a number of contradictory measures, a good part of which are almost impossible to implement. As for the much advertised 're-establishment of the state', this never resulted in a clear and/or concrete set of proposals; however, the governmental party's interference in the inner workings of the public administration showed that it was simply a façade to colonize the state and control the civil servants. Finally, the reform of the pension plans was delayed after the election and the initial plan managed to rally literally the entire work force against it (thousands of people marched in the streets of Athens just last December). Finally, the plan was temporarily abandoned as the cabinet minister responsible resigned over a personal housing by-law violation. The task of this reform was passed on to the next minister, who faced not only the reactions of the Unions but a widespread mistrust of the Government when yet another major economic and political scandal was revealed in a dramatic way.

In fact, throughout 2007 a number of governmental actions were the outcome of the misuse of state power. This was a pattern set primarily the previous year. The ill-advised transfer of a number of pension plans into hedge funds, which was proved to benefit a number

of financiers linked to the government and led to the resignation of the minister responsible, was probably the most striking example, that is, until December. It was then that the Secretary General of the ministry of culture, a political appointee of the Prime Minister himself, attempted to commit suicide. This shocking action was however only the tip of the iceberg, since it was soon revealed that this individual was connected not only to a sex scandal but more significantly to a series of corrupt distributions of millions of Euros through the secret account of his department.

Finally, another major issue that confronted the government domestically was the content of the history text-book for the sixth grade. The book, which was authorized by the government agency responsible, challenges some of the dominant myths of modern Greek history. This was enough for nationalists, of all backgrounds, to react and demand that the book be withdrawn as an official text for students. Since the majority of the reactions came from ND supporters, the government tried to maintain its image as a rational, liberal and non-nationalist political force by deferring the issue and through procedural excuses to sweep it under the carpet. Finally, however it gave in to the pressure and withdrew the book. To many it was yet another proof of the Government's unreliability.

Foreign Policy: Going with the Flow

During the last year the Government's foreign policy did not changed. The Karamanlis government continued a rather passive political strategy. The visit of UN commissioner Mathew Nimic concerning the issue of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) (January), the visit of the Turkish Chief of Staff to Salonica (April) or the visit of Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs to Athens (December) did not result in any progress on the thorny issues with Turkey or the question of the name of the neighbouring 'Macedonia'. Nor did the government manage to take advantage of Chancellor Merkel's visit to Athens or Prime Minister Karamanlis' trip to Moscow (December), to New Zealand and Australia (May) to promote the country's interests. Greece has kept a very low profile regarding EU developments, as well as maintaining a low profile in the region and in relation to the events that marked the Mediterranean countries. The only exception to this pattern was the visit of President V. Putin to sign the agreement for the build-

ing of the Bourgaz-to-Alexandroupolis pipeline to transport Russian natural gas. The profound economic impact on Greece and the region itself is clear.

The Opposition

In confronting all these issues, the leading opposition party (PASOK) proved to be strikingly inefficient. Its new leader George Papandreou, son of the party's founder Andreas, did not succeed in capitalizing on the Government's failures. Given its long involvement in government, PASOK had a hard time distancing itself from the Government's political strategy. In fact, on key issues, PASOK's policies did not differ from those of ND. PASOK attempted to criticize the Government more on ethical and managerial grounds than on political ones. In addition, a number of inconsistent and often confusing organizational initiatives by its leadership failed to revitalize the party, or to renew its personnel and its overall image. The latter was crucial to its political efficiency. Thus, although the public opinion polls showed a clear popular disenchantment with the ND government, PASOK did not make the expected political advances.

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As PASOK struggled with its opposition tactics, the major burden of the opposition was carried by the Synaspismos of the Radical Left (SYN), an alliance of left-wing parties and individuals, mainly through parliamentary but also extra-parliamentary activity. This party, with its radical rhetoric that was distinct from the dogmatism of the Communist Party (KKE), found itself in alliance with almost every expression of public discontent. Led by an ex-communist member of the European Parliament, Alecos Alavanos, SYN managed to make political advances and displayed great dynamism. It penetrated the electoral base not only of the stumbling PASOK but also of KKE.

The absence of effective opposition to the Government also created some space for the Communists to mobilize the population's feelings of protest. The base of

this mobilization was structured around a strong 'euroscepticism', an anthropomorphic 'anti-imperialist' and often unexpected nationalist rhetoric, and a zero-sum logic vis-à-vis the politics of all the other political parties. In a similar vein, the small radical right-wing party (Popular Orthodox Rally- LAOS), which had already elected a member to the European Parliament (2004), seemed to be making advances. The mid-year polls indicated that the influence of this party had been consolidated and that it exceeded the three percent threshold necessary to enter the Greek Parliament. This was verified in September's general elections.

The Election, the Sign of a New Era?

The September 16th election was called with just one month's notice, when the fires that had devastated the country had not quite been put out. This was the shortest electoral campaign period since 1974. Although many expected that the election would be called soon after the end of the summer holidays, the opposition parties were not quite ready. The striking culpability of the Government for the country's calamity had led to the assumption that the election would be postponed. The Government however, building on the opposition's weaknesses and on excessive use of state funds (paying cash to everyone who claimed some loss in the fires) ran an electoral campaign literally without a program, based on the argument that ND was the only party trustworthy and capable enough to run the country's government. Arguments like that had been supported by the positive effects of the ND's recent 7th Congress (July) and were sustained by a generally magnificent communicative strategy. In fact it was the latter that cemented the electoral support for the Governmental party when this was endangered by the natural disasters and the Government's overall incompetence.

Under these circumstances the electoral result was somewhat to be expected (see Table 25). ND lost about 3.6% of its vote and achieved only a slim majority of 152 seats in the 300-seat Parliament. However, given that LAOS attained 3.8% and 10 seats, one could argue that the overall strength of the country's right-wing forces was left intact, although electoral studies have shown that LAOS draws its support from all parts of the political spectrum. PASOK, which had run an inconsistent campaign, exposing its political, organizational and primarily its leadership

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weaknesses, incurred a loss of 2.4%, which was translated into 15 fewer seats in parliament. The big winners of the election were the parties of the left. KKE gained 2.25% and SYN 1.74%.

The electoral results had divergent effects upon the country's political forces. ND seems a little numb; the two-seat parliamentary majority could not give its leadership any security and/or flexibility. More dramatic were the reactions within PASOK, as the electoral defeat of a good part of the party was attributed to the weak leadership of George Papandreou. Over the two months that followed, the Greek Socialists became involved in a bitter leadership battle. This was settled in the re-election of George Papandreou with a commanding 55.5% in a three-way race. The party, however, remained divided and was still without enough steam to lead an effective opposition. Under these conditions, SYN with a much stronger parliamentary caucus has capitalized on its electoral gains and displays a dynamism unprecedented for a left-wing party. This was a dynamism which drew its strength from the people's continuous and deep-seated disenchantment with PASOK's governmentalist opposition and KKE's

sterile dogmatism. This dynamism was not stifled even when SYN's very successful leader announced his departure from the leadership of the party. All the serious studies indicate that this small party already commands well over ten percent of the popular vote. By the end of 2007, support for what the Greeks call ‘bipartism’ (the two party system) displayed signs of fatigue and even decay. As ND and especially PASOK stagger between incompetence, misuse of political power and corruption, which in effect have led them away from genuine societal concerns and limited them to the management of state affairs, the possibility of a new radical realignment of political forces appears closer. The political events of 2007 set the stage for such a development; however, since ‘the proof is in the eating’ the real test will be the 2009 European Elections.

| TABLE 25 | | Greek Parliamentary Elections 1993 – 2007 | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|------------|---|------------|-------|------------|-------|------------|-------|------------|-------|--|
| Party | 10/10/1993 | | 22/09/1996 | | 09/04/2000 | | 07/03/2004 | | 16/09/2007 | | |
| | % | Seats | % | Seats | % | Seats | % | Seats | % | Seats | |
| ND | 39.3 | 111 | 38.1 | 108 | 42.7 | 125 | 45.4 | 165 | 41.83 | 152 | |
| PASOK | 46.8 | 170 | 41.5 | 162 | 43.8 | 158 | 40.5 | 117 | 38.10 | 102 | |
| POLAN | 4.8 | 10 | 2.9 | - | - | - | - | - | | | |
| KKE | 4.5 | 9 | 5.6 | 11 | 5.5 | 11 | 5.9 | 12 | 8.15 | 22 | |
| SYN | 2.9 | - | 5.1 | 10 | 3.2 | 6 | 3.3 | 6 | 5.04 | 14 | |
| LAOS | | | | | | | | | 3.80 | 10 | |
| Others | 1.4 | - | 6.6 | 9 | 4.8 | - | 4.9 | - | 3.08 | | |
| Total | 100 | 300 | 100 | 300 | 100 | 300 | 100 | 300 | 100 | 300 | |

Source: Ministry of the Interior, Public Administration and Decentralization.