

Greek government under pressure following forest fires

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4 September 2007

While the forest fires that have raged in several Greek regions throughout the summer are being brought slowly under control, the political fallout is growing.

The loss of life and property caused by the fires has led to mourning and despair in broad sections of the population. But what prevails above all is anger with the conservative government of Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis and the entire political set up that bears major responsibility for the disaster.

Nearly all large Greek cities have seen protests in which tens of thousands have participated. Silent marches took place under the slogan “Mute anger—Deafening silence”. About 15,000 people marched in the capital, Athens, on August 29. Most were dressed in black as a sign of mourning for the 64 people who lost their lives in the fires.

The protests were organised by non-governmental organizations and citizens’ initiatives that have sprung up in recent weeks. An appeal to support the demonstrations, mainly spread by mobile phone text messages and email, began: “They let Greece burn.” In Athens, scuffles broke out on the periphery of the largely peaceful demonstration. About 300 mostly young people battled with the police, who used batons, tear gas and water cannons.

In Thessaloniki, several thousand demonstrators took to the streets. “Our patience is at an end. We have had enough,” could be read on some banners. Similar protests were held in other Greek cities.

Ever harsher austerity measures, corruption and nepotism underlie the fact that the forest fires, which are not unusual at this time of year, have led to such tragedy. Both the current and previous governments have come under criticism for failing to do anything about the constant fire-starting, which is instigated each year by property speculators. Fires are lit in vacant forest plots, foundations are then illegally laid, with planning permission being sought from the authorities retrospectively. This practice has been going on for a long time and has usually been tolerated by the government in Athens.

The fires have also exposed the catastrophic condition of

Greece’s fire brigades. According to media reports, only 8,000 of the required 12,500 permanent posts for fire-fighters are actually filled. Some of the equipment is in such poor condition it defies description. In many cases, smaller fire-brigade units did not even have basic equipment. Like the local inhabitants, they were forced to use water buckets and branches against the flames.

The government is also responsible for the poor organization of fire-fighting operations. In order to try and stall demands for more funds and equipment, the government last year replaced the whole leadership of the country’s fire-brigades. Experienced officials were switched for members of Karamanlis’s New Democracy Party (ND). The government’s irresponsibility is attested by the fact that a national fire-service coordinator was only nominated two days after the outbreak of the fires.

The national forest administration is barely able to function due to funding shortages. No fire breaks have been created in the forests. Similar conditions exist in the area of garbage disposal. To save funds, the government has failed to invest in modern incineration plants and tolerates open landfill sites that regularly catch fire in hot weather.

With many fires now contained or extinguished, the consequences have been catastrophic.

According to initial estimates, the damage amounts to some 5 billion euros (\$US6.8 billion). About 16,000 people have been made homeless. Over 100,000 hectares have been devastated. In rural areas, many people have lost everything. Some 4.5 million olive trees were destroyed, destroying the livelihoods of many farmers. There are only vague estimates for the number of livestock that fell victim to the flames. The army has already been brought in to remove thousands of animal carcasses.

The government’s promise to rapidly provide assistance for the victims has done little to dispel widespread anger. Every homeless person is to receive just €3,000; those who have lost their own house will receive €10,000 compensation. It is doubtful that everyone who has suffered a loss will receive even these paltry sums.

According to the Greek daily paper *Eleftheros* some €200 million has already been collected in individual private donations. Greeks living abroad have been particularly generous in their donations.

The fire disaster presently dominating the Greek media will certainly affect the parliamentary elections on September 16. Over two weeks ago, ND decided to bring forward the parliamentary elections that were due next year. Karamanlis justified the decision by saying he wanted a “strong popular mandate” to carry through his policies.

According to the latest opinion polls, ND enjoys barely a 2 percent lead over the opposition Social Democrats of PASOK, whereas three months ago it was nearly 10 percent. Some commentators believe ND could fall behind PASOK by the time of the election, not least because they have denied any responsibility and made the ridiculous claim that the fires were started by “terrorists” intent on destabilising the country.

The Karamanlis government is more despised than any other government in recent Greek history. Since taking power three years ago, Karamanlis has faced growing voter disapproval. The situation of ordinary people has worsened appreciably as a result of a rigid budgetary policy, for which the prime minister was expressly praised by Brussels. There have been repeated protests, for example against pension cutbacks.

Karamanlis has brought forward the elections in order to use ND’s diminishing lead over PASOK to implement further far-reaching “reforms” in a second term, particularly in the area of taxation. The government recently came under massive pressure because it was involved in a scandal involving the country’s social insurance system. State representatives responsible for administering these funds are suspected of having used them for illegal speculation. An investigation has already reported, but it is only to be discussed after the elections.

Karamanlis comes from an old Greek political dynasty. His uncle, Konstantinos Karamanlis, was several times prime minister and president and created ND in 1974 after the fall of the military junta. The party was established as a rightwing counterweight to the strong social democratic and communist parties. It included royalists, pro-American liberals and supporters of the Christian-Orthodox Union.

Anti-communism continues to form an important basis of support for the party. Unlike PASOK, ND maintains an uncritical relationship with the US and the more powerful European states. Konstantinos Karamanlis is considered Greece’s “European architect”, laying the foundations for Greek entry into the European Union under his leadership.

Despite the immense unpopularity of Karamanlis, PASOK has failed to make much headway. PASOK leader Georgios

Papandreou’s accusations ~~Ty~~against the ND government cannot hide the fact that when in power, his own party advocated the same policies as those carried out by ND. With short interruptions, PASOK has governed Greece for the past twenty years. Under PASOK, funds for public facilities and infrastructure were cut back in order to satisfy Brussels and meet the criteria for the introduction of the euro. It is noteworthy that the current protests are directed not only against the ND government, but also against the entire political elite.

It is possible that smaller parties may benefit in the elections from the rejection of the two large parties. The Greek Communist Party (KKE) and Synaspismos (bloc or coalition) hope to win votes from former PASOK supporters.

The KKE, the oldest party in Greece, presently has twelve seats in parliament. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the KKE lost many members, funds and influence. After splitting into several wings, today only a hard core of ex-Stalinists remain, and even they are divided by bitter internal feuds. Politically, the KKE does little more than pose half-hearted reformist demands on the government of the day and does not represent any alternative to PASOK.

Synaspismos is a catch-all for the most diverse left-wing groupings. Greens, pacifists, feminists, radicals and former Stalinists can all be found in its ranks. The heterogeneous composition of this party is matched by its ill-defined programme. Despite its sometimes radical utterances, it advocates a purely reformist perspective, seeking to pressurize PASOK from the left.

The extreme right also hopes to gain strength in the coming elections. The racist LAOS, which was established in 2000 in a split from ND, has made gains in recent years and has one member in the European Parliament. It combines superficial criticism of the government’s anti-social policies with anti-European, nationalist rhetoric. It vehemently opposes globalization and regularly leads campaigns against immigrants, predominantly against Albanians. Despite their differences, ND regularly forms alliances with LAOS in local elections.



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