

## Parliamentary elections in Greece

# Conservatives gain at expense of PASOK

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The ruling conservative New Democracy (ND), led by Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis, was re-elected with a slight majority in the Greek parliamentary elections held on Sunday. The party won 41.8 percent of the vote, 4 percent less than in 2004.

According to a recently introduced law, the party with the biggest share of the vote automatically receives an additional 40 mandates, which means that ND can maintain its parliamentary majority with 152 of 300 seats, despite a clear shift to the left on the part of the electorate.

The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), headed by its leading candidate Georgiou Papandreou, received 38.1 percent in the party's worst result since 1977. It lost more than 2 percent compared to the last election and enters the new parliament with just 102 deputies.

The Communist Party (GCP) was able to increase its vote, which rose from 5.9 to 8.1 percent of the vote (22 seats). The Radical Left (SYRIZA) also increased its total from 3.3 to 5 percent (14 seats). For the first time, the extreme right-wing nationalist-religious LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally) won enough votes—3.8 percent (10 seats)—to enter parliament.

Following predictions of a close race between Karamanlis and Papandreou, and under conditions in which the Karamanlis government came under substantial pressure in recent weeks, the victory of the conservative ND came as a surprise for many commentators.

At the beginning of August, Karamanlis decided to move up the election, which originally had been planned for next year. He justified this move with the claim that he sought a “powerful popular mandate” to push through his planned political programme. At that time, his ND enjoyed a 10 percent lead over PASOK, according to opinion polls. The conservatives were fearful, however, that a series of political scandals would evaporate this lead by next year and preferred to call imminent elections.

The situation then changed dramatically following the catastrophic forest fires of last month. The fires, which raged across the mainland close to the capital Athens, on the peninsula Peloponnes and the island Euboea, costing nearly 70 lives, cast a critical light on the state of the country's political elite, and above all the government.

The policies of cuts pursued in recent years, combined with corruption and nepotism, were a major factor contributing to the tragic consequences of the forest fires, which scorched tens of

thousands of hectares of land and forest and robbed thousands of farmers of their livelihood.

The fires not only revealed the deplorable state of the country's fire brigades, which are hopelessly understaffed and insufficiently equipped, but also the complicity of official political circles with criminal land speculators who were responsible for starting most of the fires. These speculators set fire to the forests in order to then illegally construct properties on the scorched earth, and then later receive the stamp of approval from local authorities. The method has been known for some time and has long been tolerated by the government in Athens.

While Karamanlis sought to deny any responsibility, accusing “terrorists” of carrying out the arson attacks, mass protests developed to protest the failure of the government to deal with the crisis. In Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities, ten of thousands rallied and gave vent to their anger.

To date, not a single politician or functionary has been called to account, and there have been no real efforts to investigate and determine responsibility for the fire catastrophe.

Within the space of two weeks, poll ratings for Karamanlis fell by more than 10 percent. The fire disaster was not the only factor leading to the plummet in support for ND. Since being elected in 2004, ND has carried out cuts in social security benefits, wages and living standards unparalleled in the recent history of the country.

While Greece has registered one of the highest rates of economic growth in the European Union with a constantly declining budget deficit, the population has been confronted with healthcare and pension cuts, as well as increased taxes. At the same time, Karamanlis's unyielding austerity course has been repeatedly praised by the EU bureaucracy in Brussels. In the event of re-election, Karamanlis announced that he would stand firm on this course and seek further “reforms” in tax, education and pension policies.

Immediately after his election victory, Karamanlis declared, “You have spoken out loud and clear and chosen the course, which will be implemented in the country during the next years.” In view of his plans, his words can only be regarded as a threat. The European Union and the International Monetary Fund are demanding a radical reform of the Greek pension system, which will inevitably mean more privatisations and further cuts.

There were already major protests last year by students protesting against the anti-social policies of the government and

the introduction of study fees. But such demonstrations, together with further protests against its pension policy, were simply brushed aside by the government.

Predictably, the Greek and European press assessed the election result as confirmation of the government's free market policies. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* wrote, "The undisputed economic successes of the Karamanlis government...were honoured at the ballot box." According to *Spiegel Online*, in the long run, "the economic and financial successes of the conservative government were decisive for the re-election of Karamanlis."

In fact, the victory of the conservatives is largely a result of the political bankruptcy of the social democrats. Large sections of the population no longer regard PASOK as a "lesser evil" or any sort of alternative to the right wing.

PASOK had dominated Greek politics since the end of the military dictatorship in 1974. From 1981 to 1989, and between 1993 and 2004, it formed the government and exerted a powerful influence over the country's trade unions. In the 1980s, PASOK defended a nationalist economic and political policy, which predominantly took the form of anti-American and anti-European rhetoric, while at the same time implementing a number of social reforms. In the 1990s, however, in line with other European social democratic parties, it increasingly adopted a neo-liberal economic model and pushed through drastic welfare cuts at the dictate of the European Union.

PASOK increasingly lost support because of its neo-liberal policies and increasingly aggressive foreign policy, such as its support for the NATO war against Yugoslavia. In 2000, it was only able to secure a narrow victory against ND in national elections.

Georgiou Papandreou took over as head of the socialists shortly before the 2004 elections, at a time when the party was already largely discredited and unable to win support for its populist-led election campaign and promises of social reform. Karamanlis and his ND were able to take power.

In the recent election campaign, Papandreou tried to pose as a left alternative to Karamanlis. On the question of pensions, for example, he announced plans reforms. Criticising Karamanlis as the forest fires raged, he promised to combat corruption and the land speculators and pledged more funding for the fire brigades and forestry.

But his efforts were without success. The Greek population had gone through its own bitter experiences with PASOK. During its 20-year period in power, a network of corruption and nepotism permeated the country. The methods of the criminal land speculators had always been tolerated under PASOK governments, and cuts in the sphere of public policy had begun long before Karamanlis came to power.

Now chairman Papandreou is under fire following the defeat of PASOK. Just hours after the publication of the election result, elements in the party demanded the resignation of Papandreou, whose father and grandfather had already filled the post of prime minister and had run the party like a family business. Under their leadership, they had been able to hold together the different wings of the party.

Some commentators expect violent internal faction fighting over

the coming weeks and months. The former culture minister Evangelos Veniselos and the former European Union commissar Anna Diamantopoulou have already been suggested as possible successors to Papandreou.

The GCP and SYRIZA were also able to benefit from the defeat of PASOK.

The Stalinists increased their electoral support by 2 percent compared to 2004. The GCP is the oldest party in Greece and had a certain degree of popular support in the years following the overthrow of the military dictatorship. The party maintained a strong orientation to Moscow until the end of the 1980s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated the end of the GCP. Following a series of splits, a hard core of former Stalinists remain who are also split amongst themselves. Politically, the GCP functions more than ever merely as a political auxiliary to PASOK.

The leftist SYRIZA is a coalition of very diverse radical groups, including Greens, pacifists, feminists, radical leftists and so-called socialists. Just as the party is thoroughly heterogeneous in its composition, so it is totally diffuse and flexible with regard to its programme. In the election campaign, it stressed ecology as the lowest common denominator, following violent disputes in its ranks prior to the election.

The party leadership had deliberately refrained from raising socialist demands. Instead, the party banked on a victory for PASOK, which would have then opened up the possibility of a coalition with SYRIZA.

The entry of LAOS into parliament must be taken as a serious warning. For the first time since the end of the military dictatorship, an extreme right wing has representation in the Greek parliament. LAOS combines ultra-nationalism with religious orthodox positions. It demands an increased role by the Greek Orthodox Church in political life and regularly organises campaigns against foreign workers, in particular Albanians. In the election campaign, it agitated against any admission of Turkey into the European Union. The party emerged as a split-off from ND in 2000 has been able to profit from the anti-social policies of both ND and PASOK and divert growing discontent by some social layers into reactionary nationalist channels.



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