

Greek ruling coalition takes losses in local elections

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Greece's ruling coalition suffered a defeat in the central populated areas of Greece in the regional and municipal elections held on Sunday. Around 10 million citizens were entitled to vote for 325 mayors and 13 regional governors. The actual turnout was around 60 percent.

The ruling coalition of New Democracy and the social-democratic PASOK party held its ground in most regions but lost in the capital, Athens, and the surrounding Attica region, where almost half the country's population lives. In both Athens and Attica, New Democracy candidates were pushed into third place.

In line with Greek election law, a run-off is held between the two leading candidates if none of them win a 50 percent majority in the first round. The second round of voting is due next weekend and will come amid voting for the European election. This is the first time in 40 years that New Democracy candidates failed to reach the second round in Athens and the Attica region.

Just a decade ago, Greece's two main political parties could pick up around 80 percent of the vote in federal and municipal elections. Now, after five years of devastating austerity, which has seen the economy shrink by the largest margin since the great depression, their combined vote is less the 30 percent. In order to avoid its complete political eclipse, PASOK recently formed an alliance with a new political movement called Elia, or Olive Tree.

In both Athens and Attica, the run-off will be between the candidates backed by Elia and SYRIZA respectively. SYRIZA received enough support for its candidates to enter the second rounds in Athens and Attica, but failed to make significant headway in the rest of the country.

SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras claimed that the vote on Sunday showed a shift in support for his party. In fact, the 23.6 percent polled by the SYRIZA candidate in Attica was down from the 30.19 percent the party polled in June 2012.

For its part, the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party consolidated its support, with over 7 percent of the vote across the country. In Athens, Golden Dawn was able to double its vote compared to the last elections in 2012, picking up over 16 percent.

In a number of municipalities, Golden Dawn party outpolled Elia and pushed the alliance into fourth place. Despite the prosecution of all of its parliamentary deputies, including its leader Nikolaos Michaloliakos, after the murder of anti-fascist musician Pavlos Fyssas, Golden Dawn has been able to gain support by presenting itself as an opponent of social attacks, foreign finance capital, and EU-imposed austerity.

The main responsibility for this development lies with SYRIZA and Tsipras, who is also the leading candidate of the European Left group in next weekend's European election.

Tsipras has used every opportunity, particularly in his trips abroad, to stress the loyalty of his party to the European Union and to Washington. The most recent occasion came last Friday, when Tsipras took part in a debate with the candidates of the main political groupings (conservative, social democrat, liberal and Green) standing in the European elections.

In the panel discussion, which was televised across Europe and translated into 23 languages, he made limited criticisms of austerity policies but reiterated his support for the EU. He said, "People are critical of Europe. We have got to give them an alternative." He stressed this did not mean fighting the EU: "We have got to save it, but also change its nature."

After the economic and social meltdown of the past four years, the ruling elites in Greece and Europe fear that Greek voters will turn next Sunday's European election and second round of municipal and local elections into a referendum against the government.

Recent opinion polls predict that SYRIZA could gain between 3-5 percentage points more than New Democracy in the European election. Such a result would make the continuation of the current coalition in Athens, which governs with a slender two-seat majority, increasingly untenable.

A number of commentators have predicted new federal elections should SYRIZA top the poll. One factor which could have a negative influence on the SYRIZA vote is the first-time participation in the European election of the right-wing populist, To Potami (The River) party, headed by the former TV presenter Stavros Theodoraki.

Tsipras' defense of the EU last Friday was aimed precisely at assuring the ruling elites in Brussels and throughout Europe that a future Greek government led by his party poses no danger to the EU or to the banks.

At the same time, the financial markets delivered their own verdict on what they expect to be a new period of imminent economic and political instability in Greece. In what was described by some traders on Monday as a "rush for the exits," prices paid for Greece's 2 percent bond suffered their biggest fall since the securities were first issued in March 2012.

The run on Greek bonds rapidly spread to the bonds of other southern European economies, notably Spain and Italy.



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