

Greek presidential vote moves to second round

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With MPs voting according to their party blocs, the government mustered the votes of just 160 Greek MPs from the 300-strong parliament in the first round of the vote for presidential candidate Stavros Dimas.

The vote on Wednesday evening was slated to be held in February 2015, but was brought forward by conservative New Democracy (ND) Prime Minister Antonis Samaras amid a deepening economic and social crisis. The election is being held over three rounds, with the concluding vote scheduled for December 29.

According to the Greek constitution, a president can only be elected by a two thirds majority. If parliament fails to elect a head of state, general elections are immediately triggered. All opinion polls show the opposition SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) party ahead in the polls.

As the ruling coalition between ND and the social-democratic PASOK party has the slimmest of majorities in the parliament, with 155 seats between them, the election of the president is expected to go to the final round. The government's candidate received far less than the 200 votes required in the first round. It is a certainty that it will also fail to reach this target by December 23's second round. However, by the third vote the threshold for electing the president drops to 180.

By that stage the government must secure an additional 25 seats from MPs among a number of smaller parties—the Democratic Left, Independent Greeks and the fascist Golden Dawn. The government also hopes to win the support from a number of Independent MPs, who have left the coalition at various points since it was elected two years ago.

In the first round, just five independents backed the government's 155 MPs. One-hundred-thirty-five MPs

abstained (MPs cannot vote “No” in a presidential vote and instead state they are “present” during the roll call).

Five others were absent from the vote. Of the 24-strong bloc of independent MPs, eight had originally signalled they would vote for the government ahead of the ballot.

All 70 SYRIZA MPs opposed the government, with the exception of one of their MPs who was abroad. Also opposing the government were the 12 Independent Greeks (ANEL), the 12 Communist Party of Greece (KKE), the 10 Democratic Left (DIMAR) and all 16 Golden Dawn MPs. *Kathimerini* reported Wednesday evening that the government was stepping up its “efforts to win round undecided MPs,” with “sources suggested that an initiative by five independents and three Democratic Left MPs aimed at securing a cross-party consensus for president and setting elections later next year could gain extra backing in the coming days.”

PASOK leader and Deputy Prime Minister Evangelos Venizelos said the government was open to compromises to ensure the president was elected. “He suggested, for instance, providing SYRIZA with representation on a Greek team to negotiate with the troika,” *Kathimerini* reported—referring to the team of the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank that coordinates Greek austerity measures with the Greek government.

Venizelos said, “We advance to the third round while waiting for a response from opposition parties to an approach that would link the presidential election to the national negotiation team. Then we would be open to discussing all options because what we are concerned about is the national interest.”

The fate of the government may hang on the votes of Golden Dawn, as both Independent Greeks and the Democratic Left had said they will oppose the election

of Dimas.

Just prior to the vote, ANEL leader Panos Kammenos said, “We want elections, because the country needs to draft a new economic policy, including a debt restructuring, as soon as possible... We foresee a coalition government that would exclude pro-bailout parties like New Democracy and the Socialists [PASOK] that have failed to turn around the economy.”

On Thursday Kammenos met with Konstantinos Mitsotaki, a former prime minister and ND leader, at the latter’s invite. Noting the significance of the talks, *I Efimerida Ton Syntakton (Ef.Syn.)* said, “Those in the know... see behind these moves by Mitsotakis the intention to oust Samaras from the premiership, if not from the country’s political scene, and the formation of a government of national unity.”

The Golden Dawn bloc of MPs was only able to participate in the vote due to the authorities allowing seven deputies, including party leader Nikos Michaloliakos to leave prison on a day release. The Golden Dawn MPs have been in prison for more than a year, pending trial on charges of being members of a criminal association. In unprecedented scenes, they were transferred under armed guard from Athens’ high-security Korydallos prison to parliament, arriving just before the vote began.

The extraordinary move of the government in ensuring the presence of the fascists, who are routinely denounced as “criminals”, points to them having reached a deal.

Although Golden Dawn declared beforehand it would reject Dimas’ candidacy in the first round, they have not said how they will vote in subsequent rounds. Given the proven close connections between sections of the government and Golden Dawn it is entirely possible that, in return for their support, they have been promised leniency, and that the charges against the fascists could eventually be dropped ahead of their 2015 trial.

The presidential vote was called by Samaras under conditions where he was unable to secure further loans from the troika. The troika are demanding even deeper austerity, giving Athens a two-month extension to its current loan terms in order to come up with proposals for more cuts, including a further slashing of pensions.

This makes a mockery of any pretence of democracy and underscores the vise-like grip the international

financial aristocracy have over economic and social life.

This was illustrated by the high-level interventions into the elections by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who all but declared his support for Samaras’ candidate. Juncker recently warned of the perils of the “wrong election result”. He stated, “I wouldn’t like extreme forces to come to power,” adding, “I would prefer if known faces show up.”

Juncker’s statement was backed up by European Economic Affairs Commissioner Pierre Moscovici, who concluded a two-day visit to Athens Tuesday. Moscovici said the government had to complete its austerity programme, insisting, “It is time to deepen the efforts for reform, it’s time to deepen the efforts to create a competitive economy.”

He added that Brussels would prefer to deal with those committed to “preserving the integrity of the euro zone and to reforms.”

The naked intervention by the European Commission into the Greek presidential vote is a message from the financial elite aimed not just at Greece. It is a warning that no retreat from austerity will be brooked in those other countries also being subjected to massive austerity cuts—Ireland, Spain and Portugal.

While in Athens, Moscovici was careful not to meet with SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras. Despite SYRIZA dropping much of its previous rhetoric about unilaterally withdrawing from the troika’s austerity programme, it has not yet done enough to satisfy the troika’s demands, and there is no confidence that it will be able to stem rising opposition in the working class.



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