

Greek presidential election goes to third round

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The second round of the parliamentary vote for Greek president Tuesday resulted in the New Democracy (ND)/PASOK government receiving just 168 votes for its candidate, former European Commissioner Stavros Dimas. Since Greek MPs are not permitted to vote “No” in a presidential vote, 131 MPs in the 300-strong chamber abstained.

The presidential vote was called earlier this month by the crisis-ridden ND-led coalition and could lead to its downfall. Under the constitution, if parliament fails to elect a head of state, general elections are triggered. These could be held as early as January 25. The main opposition party, SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left), has been consistently ahead of ND in the polls since it won its first national election during the European elections in May.

Although Dimas won eight more votes than he received in last week’s first round ballot, the government was still well short of the 200 needed for a victory. A third round of voting on December 29 will be required to decide the outcome.

In an attempt to win the support of more MPs, ND Prime Minister Antonis Samaras made an unscheduled appearance on national TV Sunday. He appealed for backing in exchange for early national elections at the end of 2015. He also pledged his support for a government including more “pro-European” figures.

According to *Kathemerini*, this “appeared to have influenced some skeptical independent lawmakers.”

The additional eight MPs voting for Dimas were from the body of independent MPs not aligned to the governing ND/PASOK coalition, SYRIZA or the other smaller parties. The majority were former members of the parliamentary group of Independent Greeks. Also voting in support of the government were former MPs of the fascist Golden Dawn, Chrysovalantis

Alexopoulos and Stathis Boukouras. Both had been absent from the first ballot. Niki Founta quit the Democratic Left (DIMAR) just prior to the vote and cast her vote as an Independent against the government. Another Independent MP, Maria Kollia-Tsaroucha, was not present.

If the government is to survive, it has to receive the support of an additional 12 MPs in the third round. All the main opposition parties—SYRIZA, the Communist Party of Greece, DIMAR, the ultra-nationalist Independent Greeks and Golden Dawn—have voted against the government so far.

The political crisis of the government deepened between the first and second round, with one of the Independent Greeks MPs alleging that he was the target of a bribe. Pavlos Haikalis claimed that he was approached by a mediator, Giorgos Apostolopoulos, who offered him up to €3 million to vote for the government. The bribe allegedly consisted of €700,000 in cash, the settlement on a bank loan Haikalis has, and the promise of contracts worth several million euros. Haikalis’ allegation followed a claim made in November by another Independent Greeks MP, Stavroula Xoulidou, who told a Supreme Court prosecutor that an attempt had been made to bribe her to back the coalition’s presidential candidate.

On Monday, state prosecutor Panagiotis Panagiotopoulos decided that the charges were unfounded and that there was not enough evidence to pursue the claims made by Haikalis. But by all accounts, the Haikalis affair has scuppered any hope the government had of securing support from the 12 Independent Greeks MPs. Just prior to the vote, the pro-coalition *To Vima* stated, “[T]he accusations of attempted bribery of Independent Greeks MPs are creating a negative climate and do not allow much

leeway in the upcoming votes. Despite the government officials' insistence that the MPs will perform their duties towards the country, the chances of the current Parliament electing a new President have all but disappeared. Even those who were wavering and were considering making that step are now having to think again, under threat of facing bribery accusations."

Even before the likely scenario of a general election, the presidential candidate vote has served to expose the leftist pretensions of SYRIZA.

In the last days it emerged that SYRIZA and the Democratic Left are working out the arrangements for them to stand on a common platform. DIMAR was founded in 2010 as a right-wing split-off from SYRIZA, with the leader of the faction Fotis Kouvelis stating at the time, "We want a left that does not feel it is legitimate to defend all workers' established rights."

Following the 2012 general election, New Democracy, PASOK and DIMAR formed a coalition that carried out brutal attacks on workers living standards at the behest of the international financial aristocracy.

DIMAR still tried to posture as a "left" critic of such policies. In October 2012, it refused to vote for the fifth austerity package, but proceeded to support the state budget that made the social cuts dictated by that austerity package. At the time, its leader, Kouvelis, said, "If the country today faces heightened pressure, and we as a leftist party participating in the government receive a portion of this pressure, you can imagine what would have happened if we had not provided it after the second general [June 2012] elections."

In June 2013, DIMAR withdrew from the government with its 14 MPs, reducing the coalition's parliamentary majority to just three. It resigned in protest at the closure of the state TV station ERT and the sacking of 2,600 employees. There was nothing principled about its exit, as Democratic Left was never opposed to the restructuring of ERT—only wanting the layoffs to be carried out while it remained on air.

On Sunday, *Ethnos* reported, "Leading members of both parties are intensely discussing the scenario of Fotis Kouvelis being the presidential candidate, following parliamentary elections which will result in a SYRIZA-led government." It added, "The agreement between DIMAR and SYRIZA appears to be one step before their pre-election marriage and is expected to be

finalised after the presidential votes are over."

On Tuesday *Protothema* reported, "According to sources, Mr. Kouvelis admitted on Monday evening to DIMAR party members and MPs that during the last few days, he spoke many times over the phone with the leader of the main opposition. Their conversations were mainly focused on the recent political developments and the possibility of cooperation between the two parties."

It added, "This prospect has been on the table since last summer and the two sides are now reportedly close to an agreement."

Such is the right-wing character of DIMAR that, according to *Protothema*, three of its MPs, Thomas Psyrras, Niki Founta and Nikos Tsoukalis, may yet decide to vote in support of Samaras in the third round.

The moves towards a pact between SYRIZA and DIMAR, a party that until recently participated in a hated government that has impoverished millions, says more about the evolution of SYRIZA than it does about Kouvelis' party.

The *Financial Times* reported that SYRIZA could also work with the Independent Greeks. Of DIMAR and the Independent Greeks, it wrote Tuesday, "Both parties have reportedly been in contact with Syriza with a view to co-operating with a future leftwing government although no details of a specific agreement have emerged."

SYRIZA already has a working relationship with the Independent Greeks as it formed an alliance with them in March last year, with the aim of propping up the Cypriot banks with aid from the European Union.



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