

## The Transition from a two-party to a multi-party system: deliberations and realignments in the Greek party system after the September 2007 elections.

*Christoforos Vernardakis*<sup>1</sup>

Immediately after the September 2007 elections, the Greek political scene witnessed an unprecedented wave of deliberations and realignments. The eruption of an open crisis in the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) became a central issue. The crisis has been smouldering since 2004, when that party lost governmental power after staying 11 consecutive years in office. This crisis has swept the whole two-party system of government that has been dominant in Greece from 1977 onwards, a period when the two main party poles, the “centre-right” New Democracy (ND) party and the “centre-left” PASOK party, were crystallised.

### 1. The crisis of Greek bipartisanship as a crisis of the political system

Since the beginning of 2007, two trends have appeared beyond any expectable, “logical” extent: on the one hand, the tendency by a great part of the electorate to move away from the two governing parties and, on the other hand, a tendency to support the parties outside bipartisanship. Political opinion-polls registered a particularly intense disregard for the political system and its effectiveness. This was a sign that the electoral absorption of public discontent by the two big parties would be highly improbable. Thus, in the September 2007 elections a 6% decline in the support for the two ruling parties<sup>2</sup> was recorded (from 86% to 80% of the electorate), while abstention rose by approximately 3.5% (on the electoral population).<sup>3</sup> In other words, approximately 10% of the electorate broke away from the electoral influence of the two big parties.<sup>4</sup> This trend continued after the September elections, culminated during the following months and is now estimated at about 65% of the electorate, an unprecedented fact for the post-1974 electoral history of Greece.

At first sight, the crisis of bipartisanship is an expression of the political weakness of the two governing parties. ND has begun to experience the wear and tear that stems from its conduct of governmental affairs, a conduct that has been registered as “anti-popular”, “inconsistent” and “ineffective”. PASOK is characterised by an unprecedented “lack of a clear and distinct political mark” that results in the weakening of its position in the party system. The crisis of the Greek two-party system is therefore based on the crisis of the two ruling parties, but is also a broader phenomenon. Essentially, it is a crisis of the post-1974 political and party system, currently locked in a **state of total weakness**. It does not produce any results, either at

---

<sup>1</sup> Christoforos Vernardakis is Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of Crete.

<sup>2</sup> The term “ruling party” refers to both of the parties of bipartisanship (ND and PASOK). However, it should not be conflated with the term “governing party”, i.e. the party that is in the government (ND).

<sup>3</sup> The estimated average *actual* abstention in the parliamentary elections in Greece is approximately 4.5% of the electorate during the period 1974-2004. Great interest in politics (a constant characteristic of Greek political culture in the post-war, post-civil war period) and the legal enforcement of mandatory voting have contributed greatly to this high rate of participation. The estimated *actual* abstention in the 2007 elections is approximately 7.5%-8% of the electorate.

<sup>4</sup> From 1977 onwards, the (two-party) sum of ND and PASOK in the parliamentary elections was the following: 1981: 84%, 1985: 88%, 1989 (1): 84%, 1989 (2): 85%, 1990: 85%, 1993: 86%, 1996: 81%, 2000: 87%, 2004: 86%, 2007: 80% of the votes.

the level of (established) state policies, or at the level of social needs. It can neither find any valves of consensus, nor create any clear, competitive (party) poles. It would like (rhetorically) to maintain regulatory policies at the level of state administration, but is unable to achieve this, having surrendered extremely vital spaces of “reform” practices to the market. It has failed as far as the nucleus of contemporary governance is concerned: the regulation of the relations and the boundaries between the state and private economy.

In addition, the current state of the two-party system is a result of the crisis of the socio-electoral alliances of the two ruling parties (of the centre-right ND and the centre-left PASOK). Their evolution since the mid-1990s as cartel parties forces them to position themselves vis-à-vis today’s dominant political antithesis of public space / private interests in favour of the latter (or to not position themselves at all). This fact aggravates their internal contradictions, strengthens social disapproval, while it creates the terms for the distancing of large parts of society from their traditional representations. The more the public space retreats in favour of private interests, the more the role of the ruling parties is disregarded and their competences decreased, given that they can neither articulate, nor guarantee some kind of “social balance” or “social contract”. Their political (and social) utility is constantly reduced.

Bipartisanship was strengthened and stabilised after the decade of the 1980s in Greece because it was founded on two distinct political plans for the Greek society and two distinct social-electoral alliances. It was founded on the existence of two “parties”, i.e. of two different mergers of political programme / social motion, as these were expressed by the liberal, pro-European ND on the one hand, and by the socialist PASOK of redistribution and social equality on the other. This difference was expressed in the electoral bodies of the two parties, with ND representing the alliance of the bourgeois and upper-middle classes, and PASOK representing the alliance of popular and petty-bourgeois social strata. The “difference” of the ruling parties functioned simultaneously as a tug of war for electoral correlations. The decrease of the one party added to the power of the other, and vice versa. The period from the end of the 1970s until the mid-1990s was the period of the “polarised two-party system”. After 1996, the convergence of the ruling parties on the basic strategies of (neoliberal) governance and the character of “cartel party” changed the form of the two-party system from “polarised” to “converging”. The shift of PASOK from “social democracy” to “centre-left” as well as the adoption of the basic strategies of neoliberal governance by that party, together with the electoral strategy of ND for its expansion into the middle-class and lower social strata, contributed decisively to this change. The ideological distance of the two parties diminished dramatically, while their electoral bodies ceased to be clearly distinct from one another. After 1996, PASOK became more “bourgeois” and ND more “popular”.

Thus, today, *the decline of the power of the one party entails a decline in the power of the other*. The crisis of the one drags along the other. The reason is the lifting of the programmatic differences between the two ruling parties, as well as of the differences in the character of their cadres and the functioning of the party; the two parties are treated as “one party”. Bipartisanship was a useful political tool for the function of the political system as long as the two parties were “different”, i.e. articulated different social demands by different social groups. Today, the utility of bipartisanship is called

into question, resulting in the dramatic decrease of the approval rates for the two ruling parties.

Due to these reasons, the current crisis of bipartisanship will not be absorbed easily by the two ruling parties. In fact, we are in the beginning of broader changes in the form of the parties and the party system, as well as in the nucleus of the political relations of representation. This is the essential difference between the current period and previous ones. Previous (coincidental) crises of the ruling parties were not linked to the wider political system and its political tools, as it occurs today.

## **2. Electoral stagnancy and declining trends for PASOK – ND**

The victory of centre-right ND in the September 2007 elections was anticipated long before they were held. However, the all-embracing superiority of ND vis-à-vis PASOK (reflected in the approval rates concerning party image, governing ability, individual expectations and leadership image), did not prevent the electoral fall of ND by approximately 3.5% of the valid votes (reduced from 45.5% in 2004 to 42.1% in 2007). The image of superiority of ND vis-à-vis PASOK is registered up until today, but at lower levels. The greater problem for the centre-right government is that, through its second electoral victory, almost all the reserves of public opinion consensus that it enjoyed after 2004 have been consumed. Today, the centre-right government shows some acute trends of decline; while it maintains a lead over PASOK, its voting rate is estimated at approximately 36-37%. The party thus tends more and more to reach the electoral limit of 35% that corresponds to the core of the traditional Right in Greece, which means that its electoral and social alliances have been limited overwhelmingly. Under conditions of structural crisis of bipartisanship, carrying the burden of the (unavoidable) governmental wear and tear and the full responsibility for the economic and social problems of governance, it seems extremely unlikely for the ND to rise beyond this electoral limit. Its most powerful – and perhaps sole – weapon remains the still intact image of Prime-minister C.Karamanlis.

The picture is much worse for the other traditional pole of bipartisanship, PASOK. Today, this party is characterised by: a) a vague social alliance, expressed electorally in an “amorphous multi-collectivism” without a solid “social body”, b) a vague political and programmatic mark in society, and c) a problematic image of its cadres, especially at the middle and local levels. Nowadays, PASOK is in a state of transition without a definite end. It is called upon itself to redefine programmatically its social alliances, clarify its political mark and renew its cadre ranks. This triple transition occurs in the context of a significant decline of the old party model that impedes and slows down the process of coming out of the crisis. It presents a picture of electoral collapse with voting rates below 30%, while its traditionally strong organisation shows signs of dismantlement.

### **3. The political forces outside bipartisanship and the critical rise of the Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA)<sup>5</sup>**

The crisis of the political system and its ruling parties strengthens all other political formations, i.e. the Popular Orthodox Alarm (LAOS) party in the ultra-conservative Right, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and SYRIZA in the Left, and the Greens in the “centre-left”. The sum of the “small” anti-bipartisan forces currently approximates 30-35%, reflecting a constantly rising trend. KKE is estimated at 9-10%, SYRIZA at 15%, LAOS at 5%, and the Greens at 1.5-2% of the electorate.

In essence, the party system tends to become trisected between ND, PASOK and “other party preferences” at an almost equal rate. This tendency was observed during the September 2007 elections in the large urban districts of the country (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Athens districts, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Piraeus districts, 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonica district, etc.) where the social strata that stand more critically towards bipartisanship, i.e. young employees in the private sector and the youngest segment of the electorate (up to 45 years old), live.

Among the smaller parties, SYRIZA presents the greatest dynamics for two reasons: a) because, through its movement-based radicalism, it has for the first time succeeded in outflanking KKE from the left part of the political spectrum, as well as in becoming the recipient of the political and “cultural” protest of broad social strata of young employees in the new private sector; and b) because it has succeeded in benefiting from the structural crisis of PASOK and in becoming a pole for the reception of social forces that leave that party. The breadth that this political field tends to occupy in the political scene has expanded greatly; this breadth, combined with the fact that it manifests ideological coherence for the first time in its history, equips SYRIZA with a significant social and electoral potential. Compared to the other “small” parties, SYRIZA is more closely linked, in ideological and political terms, to the social strata that flee from bipartisanship.

The rise of SYRIZA was firstly recorded in quantitative surveys in April-May 2007. Until then, its election results reached the typical level of 3.5-4 % of the votes and were changeable both upwards and downwards; in general, it seemed that SYRIZA was not a “solid” political force, even though it did not face the risk of staying out of the Parliament. The elements that changed the scene not only for SYRIZA but also for the whole party system were the popular mobilisations against governmental efforts to allow the founding of private universities (a policy that both ND and PASOK agreed to), and the extremely important ideological effects that these mobilisations had for the whole electorate. Through these mobilisations, a large segment of Greek society realised that the questioning of the concept of “public good” and of the free access to it (ranging from education and social security to health and public venues) constitutes a systematic policy by the dominant political system that eliminates social rights and intensifies economic and working pressure. In the qualitative surveys that were conducted in May-June 2007, participants used the case of education and private

---

<sup>5</sup> The Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA), founded in 2004, is an alliance of left-wing parties and organisations. Although it is not a single, unified party, SYRIZA represents an ambitious attempt to coordinate the electoral presence and political activities of the radical Left in Greece and has been warmly received by numerous, non-affiliated, left-wing individuals. Two of its participating parties, AKOA and Synaspismos, are also members of the Party of the European Left .

universities spontaneously in order to describe the new social cleavages and the “polarisations” surrounding them.

That SYRIZA would get approximately 5% of the votes in the September 2007 elections was crystallised even before July 2007. The rates of increase of its influence were so strong and qualitatively solid that, if the elections were conducted two months later, SYRIZA would have received 6-6.5% of the vote. Essentially, the rise of SYRIZA that is currently observed in the polls was to a certain extent anticipated by the previous period. Due to voting inertia or “electoral psychology”, the additional electoral approval was not expressed (coincidentally) in the ballot-box; however, this latter rate constitutes today its electoral “starting point”.

After the September 2007 elections, the landscape of the whole party system changed dramatically. The latent but simultaneously explosive trends of criticism vis-à-vis the two-party political system were released. ND tends to exhaust the reserves of public consensus, PASOK is passing through a period of unprecedented identity crisis, protest vote is enlarged, and this “protest” expresses various demands and characteristics. SYRIZA is sky-rocketed and doubles its electoral audience because it constitutes the political and ideological body that is most compatible with those social groups that seek to react and mobilise: employees in the new private sector with a relatively high level of education and specialisation, who are informed about social and cultural happenings, concerned about the political and ecological environment and willing to discover a new social and political activation. This constantly expanding political field – also manifested in the non-urban periphery – is not covered by the existing political system.

The movement of voters towards SYRIZA is not a mere political movement from one party to another; it should not be understood as a narrow transfer of other parties’ old voters. They reflect deeper developments within Greek society, big segments of which seek a **new political representation**, in terms of social identity.

At the same time, the forces of both KKE and (ultra-conservative) LAOS appear stable, with a tendency to rise slightly. The more the “pool” of social protest against the political system will be filling, the more chances these two parties will have in order to broaden their influence, based primarily on the lowest, popular (“poor”) social strata, the rural population and the older age groups. Finally, a notable development in the political scene involves the Greens. Despite the fact that it is still characterised by great fluidity, the Greens are beginning to register a systematic electoral presence. The continuance of the centrifugal tendencies in PASOK may increase the electoral dynamics of this political field which, according to the “conventional” political terminology, is probably positioned in the “centre-left” and may therefore constitute an unexpected competitor for the leading opposition party of PASOK.

#### **4. Can the dominant political system react?**

A party system cannot remain constantly fixed. It is about time for the bipartite party system to change, given that it proves to be ineffective and deadlocked for the interests of both the society and capital. Neither the electoral laws of reinforced proportionality, nor suggestions over a “great coalition” as in Germany can save it.

The reason for this is the fact that the Greek political elites do not have a strategy over what the point of regulatory balance between the state and capital should be, even though such a point is necessary for the exercise of public policy. Subjugated to the interests (not always the long-term ones) and the “ideological givens” of capital, the elites are cut off from the active society that begins to explore ways of expression not only outside the ruling parties, but also in many cases outside the concept of traditional politics and its institutions.

Despite the difficulties, the mechanisms of power will probably explore new paths for building up political and social consensus in the context of a “multi-party institutional axis”, in order to be able to exercise direct rule and obstruct an uncontrollable political growth of the radical social Left. Two contrasting processes will unfold in the coming months: on the one hand, an attempt to redraw the official political scene (possibly involving the breaking-up of the two ruling parties, starting with PASOK, in order to achieve the creation of an “institutional governmental axis”), and on the other hand, an attempt to build a front of the social Left (possibly involving the participation of large sections of the “social PASOK”). The Greek theatre of political rearrangements has just lifted up its curtain.

**Christoforos Vernardakis – Mars 2008**

[www.vernardakis.gr](http://www.vernardakis.gr)