IPS

INTERVIEWS 22.05.2023

‘Public opinion looked quite different eight weeks ago’

In Greece, the rule is: after the election is before the election. Arne Schildberg from Athens on the success of the conservatives

Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his conservative *Nea Dimokratia* (ND) have won the election in Greece by a surprisingly large margin. What factors were decisive for the victory?

Several aspects were decisive here. An important factor in *Nea Dimokratia's* victory was its ability to set the agenda, underpinned by the dominance of pro-government media. After all, public opinion still looked quite different eight weeks ago: ‘this government needs a lesson and will be taught one in the elections’, was the prevailing sentiment at the time. There were mass protests all over the country after the serious collision of two trains in central Greece, which had claimed many young lives. The train accident had shown that the apparent successes of the Conservatives in the renewal of Greece had in fact quite a shaky foundation, and the government initially seemed to lose control of the public discourse. In the polls, the clear lead of the ruling party *Nea Dimokratia* shrank visibly. The government then postponed the elections scheduled for April until the end of May, hoping to regain control of the public debate by then.

And this is precisely what happened. With regard to the train accident, the government was able to successfully push its narrative in the media, according to which the three largest parties bear equal responsibility for the accident. The opposition's attempt to initiate a renewed debate on the wiretapping scandal – the government had admitted to wiretapping important politicians and journalists – was also unsuccessful. After countering the protest mood, the Prime Minister's communication professionals succeeded in turning the election into a vote between stability (*Nea Dimokratia*) and chaos (SYRIZA). Considering the many crises of the last decade and the consequent desire for stability, ND was successful in scoring points with voters.

ND also profited from the chaotic beginning of the SYRIZA government in 2015, which still defines the image of the party in the eyes of many people. Notably, SYRIZA has consistently trailed the conservative *Nea Dimokratia* in the polls since 2016. Moreover, the party did not offer a clear alternative to government policy in the latest election campaign. To top it off, there were also communication errors in the final spurt of the election campaign. Through unclear statements, the party had suggested that it wanted to further increase the already high social security contributions.

How should we assess the performance of the social democratic PASOK-KINAL?

PASOK-KINAL is the secret winner of this election. Originally polling at eight per cent, the party managed to present itself as an electable alternative to its two major rivals. Through its solution-oriented campaign style, which addressed the problems of modern Greece, it was able to increase its election result to almost 12 per cent. Now, with a stronger presence in parliament, PASOK has the chance to distinguish itself from the government. It could thus succeed in gaining strength in the medium term and could establish itself as the main opposition party on the political stage.

The ND did not receive enough votes to form a one-party government. In Greece, however, coalition governments are very unusual. Could it still come to that?

Prime Minister Mitsotakis already expressed his opposition to a coalition on the evening of the election and announced new elections for the end of June. He interpreted the unexpectedly high results of *Nea Dimokratia* as a mandate from the voters to form a single-party government in the next round of elections. Because the next election will be governed by a new electoral law that gives the winner up to 50 bonus seats, the ruling party can expect significant gains in the 300-seat parliament.

So we can expect another election at the end of June. What could change in then?

As I said, ND could win up to 50 bonus seats in the June election. In that case, about 37 per cent of the votes would be enough for an absolute majority of seats, which is what the conservative governing party is speculating on. If the government can maintain its result, it can count on more than 170 seats in the 300-strong parliament. Even a constitution-amending majority of 180 seats would be within reach. If the results were to remain the same, the radical left SYRIZA would

drop from its current 71 to 60 seats, and the social democratic PASOK would also lose 7 seats and end up with 34 MPs in parliament.

If, contrary to expectations, Mitsotakis' party does not win an absolute majority of seats in June, the ruling party has several options. It could try to negotiate a coalition with PASOK. An alliance with the right-wing populist party 'Greek Solution' would be the second option. The third option is to win over a small number of MPs and bring them over into the party's own camp. Mitsotakis has quite openly raised the possibility of this – less democratic – option.

Could PASOK end up playing the role of kingmaker, even though its relations with SYRIZA and ND are clearly tainted?

From the perspective of PASOK, both the wiretapping of its chairman and the government's cover-up of this affair speak against forming a coalition with the ruling party. The dubious handling of press freedom is also working against this — under the conservative government, Greece has fallen to the last place in Europe in the Reporters Without Borders ranking. The practice of illegal pushbacks of aid-seeking migrants is another argument that speaks against a cooperation from PASOK's point of view.

For a PASOK-SYRIZA government, on the other hand, there are not enough seats in parliament. Together, the two parties have only 112 MPs. Even a coalition of all left parties, including the Communists, would not reach the majority of 138 seats. In any case, the formation of a coalition would probably fail due to the division of the left in Greece, which has been growing for decades.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



Arne Schildberg
Athens

Arne Schildberg heads the office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Athens. He previously worked in the International Policy department at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and headed the office of the Friedrich-

Ebert-Stiftung in Addis Abeba. He studeid International Relations in Leipzig and Paris.