DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 23.06.2023 | Nick Malkoutzis

Do or die

Greece is heading to its second national election. But there is little to gain for left parties — the social democrats must rise to the occasion

Greece is heading to its second national elections of this summer on 25 June, which the centre-right *Nea Dimokratia (*New Democracy party) is expected to win comfortably, giving it a parliamentary majority and another four years in power.

Kyriakos Mitsotakis is poised to return as Greek prime minister after his party exceeded all expectations in the first vote on 21 May. The party gained almost 41 per cent, increasing not only its share of the vote but also the actual number of votes it received compared to the previous elections in 2019. This was an impressive feat after four testing years in power that included the Covid19 pandemic, high numbers of migration, the war in Ukraine, as well as the cost-of-living crisis.

Opposition's defeat or government's victory?

Naturally, the focus immediately after 21 May was on Mitsotakis and what he had done right to win such a convincing victory, even though it was a few seats short of a parliamentary majority. Greece was using the proportional representation system on 21 May (on 25 June, the winning party will receive a bonus of up to 50 seats, making it easier to govern on its own).

Mitsotakis was rewarded for steering the economy towards recovery, generating a feeling of stability, strengthening the country's defence alliances, speeding up the digitalisation of public administration and removing some of the toxicity from Greece's political debate.

There is no doubt that SYRIZA and its leader Alexis Tsipras were the big

It should also not be overlooked that the Mitsotakis administration spent billions of euros on subsidy and assistance programmes linked to the pandemic and energy and cost-of-

losers last month.

living crises. It is ironic that – as a pro-market liberal – his political fortunes were heavily boosted by relying on the role of the state, EU funding and taxpayers' money.

As the second election approaches, though, the 21 May result appears more a resounding defeat for Greece's main opposition parties – left-wing SYRIZA and centre-left PASOK – than it does a resounding victory for New Democracy.

There is no doubt that SYRIZA and its leader Alexis Tsipras were the big losers last month. SYRIZA barely scraped 20 per cent, which was 11.5 points lower than its score in 2019, when it lost power to New Democracy in an electoral landslide.

Missed opportunities

The numbers were better for PASOK. The social democrats gained about 3.5 points compared to 2019 as they took 11.5 per cent of the vote. This represented a good first step for the party's leader Nikos Androulakis, after he took over the job in December 2021. Yet, PASOK is still a long way from becoming a driving force in Greek politics again.

Androulakis indicated that his next goal is for PASOK to become the genuine main opposition party and to replace SYRIZA as Greece's second-largest political grouping. Tsipras – whose leadership is now in some doubt – has accepted that his party had made some mistakes during the election campaign and that it hadn't done enough to take advantage of the proportional representation system to generate interest in a progressive alliance.

50.6 per cent of those who backed the conservatives said that they did so because they thought it was the least bad option or because they wanted to show their displeasure with another party.

The problem for PASOK and SYRIZA is that – unless there is a major surprise in the days to come – Mitsotakis will be so dominant that even the next four years might not suffice for them to become serious contenders. Apart from their relatively low support, exit poll data also indicates that the two main opposition parties failed to present convincing cases to a Greek public that was more willing to consider alternatives to New Democracy than the election result suggests.

The exit poll carried out by Metron Analysis suggests that more than half of the Greeks who voted for New Democracy did not feel a close

allegiance to the centre-right party. Also, 50.6 per cent of those who backed the conservatives said that they did so either because they thought it was the least bad option or because they wanted to show their displeasure with another party.

These numbers indicate that there was scope for the opposition parties to draw votes away from Mitsotakis. After all, his four years in power were far from flawless: there are questions about whether Greece's recovery is sustainable while the benefits of growth have been felt by very few in the country, several rule of law issues have arisen and longstanding problems in the public administration continue.

SYRIZA proved incapable of capitalising on these deficiencies, while PASOK's gains were relatively minor. Neither presented a particularly convincing alternative narrative to the low-tax, business-friendly reforms promoted by Mitsotakis — even though, to be fair, the opposition parties' attempts to highlight their ideas were also hampered by a fiercely pro-government mainstream media.

Finding a new direction

For SYRIZA, the 21 May result has triggered a period of existential contemplation. The party was initially formed as a coalition of left-wing anti-capitalist forces before being thrust towards power in 2015 by the simmering anti-bailout sentiment during Greece's economic crisis. As the crisis subsided, SYRIZA failed to find a new direction and purpose. Even after its heavy defeat in 2019, a supposed move to the centre-left did not materialise. Instead, SYRIZA maintained the bleak outlook and adversarial language that had propelled it during the crisis.

It also failed to find common ground with other parties on the left to create a governing alternative in voters' minds. The impression SYRIZA gave over the last four years is one of a party wanting to re-run the Greek crisis when most of the electorate had moved on. It remained a party of protest when the crowd had dispersed long ago.

PASOK was partly a beneficiary of this failure. Androulakis has been more moderate in his language, his party backed some of the government's initiatives and the social democrats have attempted to be constructive in opposition.

Social democracy in Greece will have to find a way to rise to the occasion and

However, PASOK remains a small and fragile party. It is easy to forget that it won almost 44 per cent of the votes in the 2009 elections — before Greece's debt crisis erupted and its

present a credible political alternative or Mitsotakis and his centre-right narrative will dominate.

support crumbled. Although the social democrats retain a substantial national network – a legacy of their glory years as a party of power – more than a decade of low support have also left PASOK with very limited resources.

The challenge facing SYRIZA and PASOK is how, from a very weak position, they will be able to represent the part of the Greek political spectrum that runs from the centre to the left. One option is for the two parties to converge. This will be extremely difficult if Tsipras remains SYRIZA's leader. He oversaw a period of high toxicity between the two parties and many PASOK members are not willing to forgive him for that. Also, Tsipras has shown over the last four years that he does not have the skills to create consensus on the left. If he is replaced, there may be an opportunity for the relationship with PASOK to be mended, but much will depend on the new leader.

If SYRIZA and PASOK do not move closer over the next four years, the other option is for one of the two to subsume the other. Based on the 21 May result, it looks more likely that PASOK would be the one to come out on top. SYRIZA's share of the vote in national elections has been contracting since it won the January 2015 elections with 36.3 per cent. Reversing this downward trend after 25 June will be a tall order for Tsipras or whoever succeeds him. The question, though, is whether Androulakis, who has yet to serve as an MP in Greece, has the political weight, the personal charisma, the political vision and a capable enough team to oversee such a transformation in PASOK's fortunes.

The next four years will bring crucial challenges for Greece in areas such as the economy, geopolitics, migration and the environment. Social democracy in Greece will have to find a way to rise to the occasion and present a credible political alternative or Mitsotakis and his centre-right narrative will dominate — as they have done over the last four years.



Nick Malkoutzis
Athens

Nick Malkoutzis is co-founder and editor of MacroPolis, a political and economic analysis website based in Athens. He has contributed to The Guardian, Die Zeit and Politico, among others.