Protracted crisis will break Greece’s political mould

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The political class is not trusted by the electorate, the two-party hegemony of the last 35 years has reached its limits and internal party discipline is breaking down, with parliamentary deputies dissenting and exiting their traditional political families.

What next

New Democracy (ND) leader Antonis Samaras, tipped to be the next prime minister, can lead the country to elections at any time by withdrawing support from the current coalition government of technocrat Lucas Papademos. While early elections are almost unavoidable and even desirable, they are also a major source of internal tension and uncertainty. One of the more dramatic results will be a radical reshuffle of the political landscape and the end of the practice of clientelism: politicians may no longer promise their supporters money and jobs, nor pledge what they cannot deliver.

Analysis

During the past two-and-a-half years, the national parliament has become an arena for fierce exchanges among parties inside, and a battleground for protests and often violent demonstrations outside. Against this growing tide of disapproval and pressure, political parties and parliamentary deputies are fighting for their political survival, amid uncertain and threatening times.

In the November 2009 elections, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) won 160 seats, the centre-right ND 91, the nationalist right Laos 15, the Communists (KKE) 21 and the reformist left Syriza 13. Today, KKE has retained all its seats, but Pasok has fallen to 131, ND 62, Laos 14 and Syriza nine, while independents have become the second-largest group, with 63. Some independents have joined new parties -- the Democratic Left or the centrist Democratic Alliance -- while others are floating, in search of a political family.

This drain has been the result of political divisions within parties, caused by the rising unpopularity of consecutive austerity packages (see GREECE/EU: Coalition to reject EU compliance tutelage - January 30, 2012). The current political discourse is monothematic; all parties are totally absorbed by the economic crisis and the imposed austerity measures.

Outlook for main parties

The most recent opinion polls indicate that Pasok, the biggest partner in the current coalition government with ND (see GREECE: Uncertainty looms over coalition term - December 29, 2011) and the winner of the 2009 elections, sees its representation shrinking to single-digits. The political centre has weakened, along with a gradual loss of national sovereignty and political elites divided between those reluctantly accepting prescriptions from abroad, and those resisting but with no organised alternative in mind.

Impact

- Violent opposition to more cuts and higher taxes will further erode international partners’ faith in Greece’s commitment to austerity.
- The political centre, the traditional support base for the two leading parties, is weakening, and will give way to more polarised politics.
- Left-wing parties will be the main beneficiaries of this flight from the centre.

Most parliamentary parties have lost members under the stress of the economic crisis
Pasok

Former Prime Minister George Papandreou's humiliation at last November's Cannes summit, where he had to withdraw his announcement of a referendum, led to a crisis of leadership within Pasok and Papandreou's isolation from party members, most of whom want a new leader as soon as possible. Pasok has been deeply wounded by its handling of the economic situation and has lost most of its electoral power. It is expected to suffer a humiliating defeat in the next elections, paying the price for ineffectiveness in tackling the problem and its extremely unpopular support of austerity.

The party is now struggling for its very survival. It is most likely that Evangelos Venizelos, the current deputy prime minister and finance minister, will be its next leader.

ND

Cooperation with the Papademos government has been forced on Samaras, who has been drawn into a situation he had always wanted to avoid. At the moment, ND seems to be the only party that can command a large percentage of the vote, yet most probably it will not be able to form a single-party government after elections, to be held in the spring.

Samaras has been forced to abandon his rhetoric against the economic policy dictated by Greece's memorandum of understanding (MoU) with its official creditors and need to secure private-sector involvement (PSI) in a debt 'haircut'. He asked his party to vote for the latest austerity package, and appears to be more realistic regarding not just the difficulties ahead but the extreme pressures and restrictions imposed from abroad. However, his previous opposition to the first MoU and talk of renegotiating the terms of Greece's austerity package, have raised major concerns abroad and the Eurogroup has demanded written assurances that he will stick by the agreements if his party comes to power.

The ND leader has consistently asked for elections; however, his party has also been weakened as a result of the February 12 vote, by those who refused to follow the party line.

Left-wing anti-politics

The main beneficiaries of the disintegration of centre-right and centre-left politics are the parties of the left, which have managed to increase their popularity substantially, adopting populist anti-austerity rhetoric. In the most recent opinion polls, the three parties of the left together have more than 40% support. However, the left is fragmented and each of the three parties has its own identity:

- Democratic Left, a new political formation which splintered from Syriza, is the main beneficiary of the drain on Pasok, and combines anti-MoU rhetoric with a firm commitment to staying in the euro-area.

- Syriza maintains an extreme and very populist anti-MoU rhetoric, calling on Greece to reject the latest bail-out.

- The KKE, which is traditionally anti-capitalist and is anti-MoU, advocates exit from the EU and is calling people to take to the streets.
While all three are able to benefit from the frustrations and anger of voters against the two main parties, which are regarded as responsible for the current impasse, they offer no coherent ideological or political alternative to the choices before the government. Left-wing politics in Greece is fragmented, exhibiting a distaste for the ideologies of European conservative parties and an aversion for the complicity of social democracy with neo-liberalism. The Greek left feeds on popular disillusionment, destitution and disaffection with the two-party system in Greece, but offers little but reaction and anger.

**Extreme right politics**

The extreme right in Greece is a force with relatively low support. Amid a climate of disaffection, far-right Laos is not benefiting as expected; this has led the party to withdraw from the caretaker coalition, and vote against the austerity package opportunistically at the last minute. The nationalist right is loud in its rhetoric against the Germans and the EU/ECB/IMF 'troika', whose prescriptions are seen as humiliating.

One of the surprises of the recent opinion polls is the rise of Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn), a party close to the neo-Nazi model, with an aggressively exclusivist ideology and a record of violence against immigrants. This is one of the most striking signs of political extremism in a country that does not have a tradition of neo-fascism in its political space.

*Word Count (approx): 1205*