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Greece

Return of the right

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The results of the Greek parliamentary elections on March 7, 2004 were very clear: except in Achaia (Patras), the periphery of Athens and Crete (55% in Hiraklion), PASOK (the Socialist Party) suffered a clear defeat. Its share of the vote fell from 44% in 2000 to 40.5%, and the right wing New Democracy Party won a relative majority in most regions. The decline was sharper in the urban centres than in the countryside, where PASOK lost around 1.5% of its vote. In the cities, it lost around 4.8% around the Athens region, 3% in Piraeus, 4.8% in Thessalonica.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/35831.jpg>]

The New Democracy (ND) increased the gap, with around 45.4% of the votes and 165 seats (42.7% in 2000), but this was far from the right wing landslide predicted by some. Moreover, the reasonably respectable score of the far right (2.2% for the bunch of fascists and nostalgics known as LAOS) remains sufficiently low to show that the ND has continued to attract a whole section of the far right, from royalists to orthodox fundamentalists symbolised by the figure of Papathemelis, a nationalist leader of PASOK who went over to the ND on the eve of the elections. The coexistence in the ND of such sectors with the ultra neoliberals has allowed a clear electoral victory, but that could pose problems in everyday management and we can see this already with the balance of the new government.

It has to be generally noted that eight years of the Simitis government have changed the face of Greece. It should be stressed that the modernization of public transport, the development of road structures, the construction of new hospitals and schools, the new school and hospital buildings, the establishment of services to help the public cope with what remains an administrative jungle, all help to explain the relative resilience of PASOK's vote. But this modernization, carried out in the framework of an economy increasingly subjected to neoliberal laws, has had a heavy cost for the masses, with unemployment (around 10%) and price increases (some everyday products are as expensive or more than in the other countries, while wages are much lower). Poverty is spreading, as shown by the number of homeless people on the streets of Athens and 23% of the population is at or near to the poverty threshold. The Olympic Games are to be held in Athens this year; this is reflected in a policy of big public works, but also by overspending at the rate of double or triple the initial budget. This will reinforce pauperization, on the basis of a growing racism. It is this social situation, more than the anger against the PASOK bureaucracy, which explains the defeat. For more than a year, the polls indicated a difference of 7 to 8% in favour of the ND, and since autumn, with the announcement of pre-electoral measures, notably favouring peasants, the gap has been reduced a little.

Another factor explains the proportions of the defeat. With Kostas Simitis, the populist dimension of the PASOK of Andreas Papandreou has been replaced by a discourse and technocratic project conforming to that of European social democracy. PASOK's governmental image is nearly the same as that of the right, and that is clear from the electoral programmes of PASOK and the ND. But a supplementary step was crossed at the beginning of 2004, with the minister of foreign affairs, Georges Papandreou - son of Andreas - becoming PASOK's official candidate. Many saw this as a desperate gesture intended to reverse the prevailing winds and hang on to the privileges of power. In fact, the operation was to some degree successful, the gap being reduced to 2% at 2 weeks before the elections, and we saw Papandreou multiply his promises (such as free transport for the unemployed!). But the real reason seems more profound; the project seems rather to have been to reduce the gap to the maximum, and to build on this relative victory to reorganise PASOK as a catch-all party enjoying more autonomy in relation to its base: PASOK would become the pole of a 'Democratic Regroupment' with some right wing allies (two leaders of the ultra neoliberal right) and others coming from the left (Maria Damanaki, recent leader of Synaspismos). All this has been orchestrated in spectacular fashion. The election for the presidency of PASOK involved a referendum open to sympathisers, in which one million voters participated, although Georges Papandreou was the only candidate!

In fact PASOK's evolution towards an American-style party and the overtures to leaders of the right led to disquiet among the rank and file which was visible at the Athens rally on March 5, where Papandreou's banalities were politely applauded, but without the militant enthusiasm evoked by some of the media. It may be that the disaffection of a part of the PASOK electorate is also linked to this project of neutralization of the historic PASOK. Also, the final scale of the defeat on the evening of March 7, which constitutes a relative setback for Papandreou, will render this project more difficult and it will be a factor in tensions and perhaps of crises inside PASOK, above all if social struggles develop. There could have been grounds for hope if there had been a large transfer of votes to the left of PASOK, towards the left reformist or indeed the radical lists. Instead, at the national level, it is the right which has benefited. That cannot be explained only by the integral support of the Greek employers for ND. More decisive, but also more serious after 20 years of PASOK government (1981-89, then 1993-2004) was the almost complete incapacity of the forces to the left of PASOK to offer credible responses.

The Greek left (reformist and revolutionary) has for a long time been marked by a sectarianism which should be inconceivable in this new millennium, and this sectarianism explains to a great degree the inability to win over the workers influenced by PASOK during the past 20 years. Worse: the dominant vision is that PASOK and the right are the same thing, and that Greek society is profoundly rightist! So, with almost 9 voters out of 10 voting for the right, there is nothing more comfortable than to retreat into one's own little world. To listen to some, the striking fact of these elections would be the increase of 0.4% in the vote of the KKE (the Greek Communist Party) or the 0.15% won by the KKE-ML instead of the 0.11% in 2000, or again the stagnation at 3% of Synaspismos.

The results clearly show 3 things:

1. Over the period from 1981 to 2004, the resilience of PASOK which, except in 1990 (38.6%), has always won more than 40% of the votes. Add to that the continuing strength of its trade union current, which in spring 2001 led the secretary of the GSEE (Confederation of Workers of Greece) to lead a big mobilisation in defence of pensions against the government of his party, and the fact that young people (those aged 18-35) voted in their majority for PASOK at these elections; it is clear that this party despite all, retains the confidence of the majority of workers.
2. It is then necessary to stress that it is the left, all tendencies together, which remains in the majority in Greece, with nearly 52% of the votes! And PASOK has only itself to blame if the right won a big victory in terms of seats; its rejection of proportional representation has rebounded against it, but that should not stop a popularization of these figures, all the more so in that nearly one in three ND voters said they had voted thus not for the party's ideas but to punish PASOK. However, the popularization of the fact that the right is in the minority will involve a tough political battle!
3. We should be clear, with all the nuances that this demands, that the overall result is that of a setback for the left of PASOK, and this setback reflects numerous years of inability to build the least idea of alternative. The KKE, despite a good campaign, only won 5.9% of the vote (5.6% in 1996, 5.5% in 2000), with significant progress in the working class suburbs. This party remains perceived as being faithful to the Stalinist, sectarian past (it proposes unity to the left of PASOK... without Synaspismos and DIKKI, which won 1.8%), and has deeply nationalist tendencies (the only alliance that it practices is with nationalist individuals, like the deputy L. Kaneli in Athens!). The far left presented at least 5 lists and won around 0.5% of the vote (between 35,000 and 40,000 votes). The risk is then great that each will continue as before, building their different fronts instead of working in unity.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/35833.jpg>]

What remains is to consider the case of Synaspismos or rather the Synaspismoses (coalition), given that this party has succeeded in drawing in its wake a part of the radical left. Initially, the Synaspismos of 1989 united the Stalinist and critical left against PASOK scoring 13% of the vote (the founding act of Synaspismos was a government with the right to kick PASOK out of power. This still has an impact since none of the two wings of this government has drawn any serious balance sheet!). After 1990 (10.2%), there was a split between the KKE and the critical left, heir of the Eurocommunism of the 1970s. After winning 2.9% in 1993, then 5.1% in 1996, it scored 3.2% in 2000 and 3.26% this

year. The end result this year was the formation of an electoral regroupment, with its proclaimed objective being to open perspectives on the left. It is self-evident that this process, even if it was contemptuously rejected by the sectarian groups, has interested OKDE-Spartakos, Greek section of the Fourth International. Even if we are far from sharing the uncritical vision of the leftwards evolution of Synaspismos of our friend and comrade Georges Mitralias, the possibility of an electoral regroupment, even with a reformist force like the rest of Synaspismos, could be a significant moment forward for the radical left. That depends on the conditions but what appeared to be the case and what has been subsequently confirmed is that the weight of the radical left was insufficient to change either the logic of the apparatuses whose main concern was parliamentary survival or the traditional perception of Synaspismos.

The Synaspismos apparatus has kept control over this operation from the beginning. This began with the name of the regroupment; the Coalition of Left and Progress became the Coalition of the Radical Left, though for everybody it remained Synaspismos, even if its acronym became SYRIZA. Moreover, the media focus remained centred on the reformist leader Nikos Konstantopoulos, and it was impossible for the workers and youth to know that the list included radical forces. Such conditions led KOE, one of the two revolutionary groups involved, to leave the regroupment, while still giving it critical support, while veteran militant Manolis Glezos was critical of the attitudes of hegemonism of some elements. But the most serious question is the dominant discourse of the regroupment; whereas an appeal to mobilization around anti-capitalist demands might have been expected, the anti-neoliberal tone remained very vague with the accent on condemnation of bipartyism and governability. The result of all this was not the 5% minimum which might have been expected, but a struggle to reach the 3% necessary for the electoral survival of the parliamentary group. It seems that half of the 240,000 Synaspismos voters (up by 21,000 in relation to 2000) are new (the former half having gone to the right or to PASOK) and came from PASOK, or the radical and even anarchist left! If such was the case, it is a positive point, even if the electoral rallies do not seem to have attracted the crowds (in Athens, it was of the same order as in 2000). On the contrary, the geography of the votes shows worrying limitations. The strongest progress (between + 0.50% and 1.3%) was in Athens (6.3%, a gain of 0.5%, concentrated in areas populated by students and tertiary workers), Phocide and in Messenia, a right wing region. However, SYRIZA lost votes in the big working class suburb of Piraeus, which remains the most significant working class concentration in Greece (4%, a loss of 0.5%). Beyond that, none of the six deputies chosen by the electors of SYRIZA belongs to the radical current. Given the paucity of this revolt, it would perhaps have been worth the trouble to fight a prior battle for a regroupment of revolutionaries, which would have been able then to discuss an alliance with Synaspismos to form a radical left bloc. To the best of its abilities, OKDE tried to do this, although in Greece it is still the case that this is less easy than top-level discussions with Synaspismos!

Drawing a balance sheet with the forces of SYRIZA is all the more necessary in that we work with them inside the Greek Social Forum and it is important to revive a structure which has been unhappily put to sleep in a period where it could have played a significant role and grown. Hard battles are ahead, against privatization, the many concessions being made to the bosses, for social security and pensions, without forgetting the context of the Olympic Games (work accidents, strengthening of the police). We need to battle for unity in action of the left (taking into account PASOK activists) and the unions (with perhaps a battle for the preservation of trade union unity, faced with the risk of a split by the KKE in the GSEE). If the Greek Social Forum is to serve as pole for proposals for unitary action, it should not be instrumentalized nor replace the development of the debate which has begun on the formation of an anti-capitalist left, a debate which will only advance insofar as it includes henceforth the greatest number of revolutionary forces, with the perspectives of an action programme. The European elections could be the occasion to prepare, finally, a radical pole, in the light of the experience of the parliamentary elections.