

GREECE: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR PAPANDREOU

By Christophoros Christophorou

Assistant Professor of Communications, University of Nicosia

The outcome of the 4 October 2009 Greek elections is a rare example of a dramatic shift in people's choices and, consequently, the fate of party leaders. Paradoxically, the difficult task that the winner is called to undertake makes its success less of a triumph. The situation is very complex because of Greece's chronic problems, while the hardships of the international economy will not make it any easier. Under the circumstances, to what extent are Giorgos Papandreou and his party in a position to respond to the many challenges facing the country? A more crucial question emerges, related to the extent to which they will break with practices (corruption and other) that hamper the country's progress.

It sounds strange, but what Greece needs first is to connect with Europe and the World, to reality. The course engaged by the Simitis government that made the country a respected partner and actor had no follow-up during the last five years. The potential of Greece as an economic and political power in the Balkans and the EU was almost left aside or spoiled by unnecessary or missed battles. Papandreou's experience as foreign minister, his contacts and esteem both at the European and the international levels, along with his communication skills and will to negotiate may contribute to placing Greece back on the map. On the difficult issues of Cyprus and relations with Turkey, seeking allies and good relations with third countries might help create a new balance.

The economy will be the crucial test for the new government. Devising an economic plan will not be a sufficient response, as many problems, structural, societal and other are an impediment to the country's development. Papandreou's proposed 'Green policies' while an innovative approach, have not been tested elsewhere yet, as an overall policy plan. Finding the necessary resources and an overall plan will be critical factors for success.

While some viewed the elections outcome as Karamanlis' failure, the results showed that PASOK's win was a clear one; it gained votes from all parties, its influence spreads evenly in urban, suburban and rural areas, and it is higher among the economically active population and the youth. There is a clear link with the dynamic groups of the society that may help the new government.

An additional asset for the new prime minister relates to the intra-party balance of power. The old clans around influential party officials appear to belong to the past, with Papandreou having imposed his control and authority. The election results showed that the party's cohesion remains intact, and the new prime minister is free to implement his policies.

The way the PASOK leader dealt with the crisis following the party's defeat in September 2007 and the course of events since then are only indicative of his overall political and tactical approaches. His plan led to success. Against a wholesale offensive by his opponents and various groups, he kept his calm and cold blood. He won the battle not only against his opponents, but most importantly against opinion polls, media and observers that were predicting the end of his political career and an eventual dislocation of PASOK. Two years later he is facing a most important challenge, that of putting Greece (definitely) on track of modernisation.

The choice is between national goals of mainly ideological/symbolical value and more pragmatic ones. The first have so far and most of the times been fought by Greece alone, or with little support or understanding by allies and others. As a result, enormous amounts of energy have been spoiled, often at the expense of other good causes. Conversely, the pursuance of more realistic goals could generate support and alliances, with positive results and benefits for Greece's interests. Papandreou is most likely favouring the second school of thought. Time will show the extent to which, as prime minister, will opt for the one or the other approach or whether he will attempt a combination of the two. His course of life so far has shown that he has the ambition to succeed. Will he do it?