

DR. ROMAN GERODIMOS

“Greek Democracy at a Crossroads”



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Thirty-seven years after the collapse of the military junta and the restoration of democracy, the Greek political system is facing an intensive and complex crisis. While radical, structural reforms to the public sector and to the economy are urgently needed in order to kick-start growth and regain the confidence of both the European Union and of lenders, the main political parties are plagued by internal antagonisms and populist rhetoric.

The leaders of the two main parties were caught playing personal political games at a time when national unity, responsible decisions and respect for the institutions of parliamentary democracy have been more critical than ever.

As much as a crisis of governance, however, this has also been a crisis of civic culture – a crisis of citizenship. All the indicators of civic engagement and trust in parliamentary democracy have plummeted. While the selection of Mr Lucas Papademos as Prime Minister – at the eleventh hour – was largely the result of an unprecedented campaign by reformist MPs, progressive media and parts of civil society, the big, “silent majority” of Greeks have stood by, watching passively as the country is facing its biggest crisis since the 2nd World War.

Populist political parties and extremist groups – both at the far right and at the far left, from within the military and occasionally the Orthodox Church – have been exploiting this situation in order to sell a parochial, irrelevant cacophony of conspiracy theories, ethno-patriotic nostalgia and victimhood. Sadly there appear to be many bidders.

Greece may soon be witnessing the undoing of decades of progressive reforms, democratisation and institutionalism, taking the country back to a mid-20th century full of emotive divisions and the politics of failure. A culture of anti-intellectualism is becoming not only prevalent, but (even more dangerously) trendy again.

It’s the culture of anti-enlightenment, which does not care for logical thinking, informed arguments, respectful dialogue and engagement; but favours stereotyping, blame-avoidance, denial and isolation. It’s a culture based on the easy solutions of laziness and fear – the twin main weaknesses of human nature; rather than the much harder ones of realistic hope, careful planning and hard work.

Yet, one of the root causes of this malaise may well be – and, given the overkill of political coverage this is quite ironic – a deficit of politics. Not in the sense of strategy games, but in that of contrasting ideas, arguments, solutions – a deficit of visions and the political tools to realise those; partly because of the inadequacies of the Greek political system,

and partly because the truth is that very few people in Europe today appear to have useful suggestions on how to deal with the crisis.

The noise from the collapse of Mr Papandreou's premiership has drowned the broader problem, which is the fact that Greek politicians may, indeed, be unable to do much about the crisis in Greece. Not because Greece is "ungovernable", as some have argued; but, because, due to huge, interdependent global challenges and equally distributed, non-transparent decision-making structures, national governments appear to be irrelevant (and, apparently, so do national electorates).

We should not forget that this state of affairs is no accident. The emergence of "the markets" as equal (if not stronger) to the governments was a conscious choice, indeed a political project, carried out over decades of deregulation and excessive neo-liberalism. The governments in America and Europe now find that the monster that they created is trying to bite the hand that feeds it.

Hence, democracy in Greece is at the crossroads between progress and retreat, survival and failure. It goes without saying that, irrespective of the broader crisis in Europe, radical, structural reforms are critically needed in Greece, in order to tackle the chronic problems of governance, especially in the areas of tax evasion / justice, competitiveness and unemployment.

However, this is not just an economic crisis – it is a fundamentally political and social one. In contrast to previous crises, the renegotiation of the social contract and the resetting of the constitutional rules of the game will have to acknowledge and accommodate globalisation, which is not an abstract, academic concept, but a present, tangible, reality.

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