

No dilemma

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The result of the Greek elections is no doubt ground-breaking. The collapse of PASOK to its pre-1980 electoral levels, the rise of the far-right to levels unimaginable since the restoration of democracy in 1974, the collapse of the traditional bi-partisanship, the elevation of the left to second place in the popular vote, are all elements of a radical re-drawing of Greece's political map. With this radical change in the political landscape, however, the election result seems to have thrown the country into the worst of all possible outcomes: un-governability – and, with it, a further collapse of the economy, political instability through repeat elections and eventually a new default. But this need not be the case.

Besides all the radical changes, the election result has produced a clear mandate – first of all to SYRIZA, the radical left coalition, but also to the parliament more generally – for an anti-austerity turn inside the Eurozone. The cumulative percentage of votes that went to parties that were openly and unequivocally in favour of a “return to the drachma” is less than 30% (including the parties that failed to gain seats in the new parliament). Despite the public discontent to austerity, in their vast majority the Greeks voted for parties that in one way or another favoured a renegotiation of the terms of the bailout and the redesign of the fiscal consolidation programme – but with a clear objective of keeping the country inside the Eurozone. These parties form a clear majority in the new parliament – some 220 out of 300 seats.

True, faith in PASOK to lead the country out of the crisis has evaporated completely; confidence in New Democracy's ability to deliver a ‘renegotiation’ has been low; and the vast majority of the ‘swing’ voters placed their confidence to SYRIZA. But the fact of the matter is that the ‘day after’ of the Greek elections finds the parliament with some 220 MPs-elect who are in one way or another in favour of keeping the country inside the Eurozone. And what is more, who all agree that the country must try to negotiate better terms with the troika and to deliver less austere policies at home. This is what the election result has produced and so this is the clear and undisputable mandate of the elections. Crucially, it is also what constitutes a common platform for the four pro-Europe parties in parliament (i.e., excluding the communists, the nationalists and the fascists).

Given the election result, it is Alexis Tsipras, the leader of SYRIZA, who carries the public legitimacy to express this mandate and to put forward the terms of the renegotiation. It is true, of course, that so far his election discourse has been confusing (if not confused) and it is not clear how passionate he is about fighting to keep the country inside the Eurozone. Within his coalition party, many would quite openly favour a euro-exit and his own view of ‘Europe’ as a neoliberal project is not too distant from such a sentiment. But on the other hand Tsipras has never openly proposed that Greece should exit the Eurozone (let alone the EU) and his message of “cancelling the memorandum” does not necessarily imply that fiscal consolidation shouldn't be pursued. In this sense, Tsipras carries with him both the anti-austerity and the pro-stability sentiments – and this explains pretty much his electoral triumph.

There is of course a problem. With merely 51 MPs, Tsipras is not in a position to form a government without the support of New Democracy. And if one looks at this from the traditional left-right perspective, it is difficult to imagine how a coalition government comprising such a heterogeneous combination – the radical left and the conservative centre-right (which has largely been stripped off from its liberal and populist wings) – can ever work. But the left-right divide has now pretty much taken second place in the background: the new politics of Greece runs along the pro-euro – pro-drachma axis. And this is the common thread that connects the four parties of New Democracy, SYRIZA, PASOK and the Democratic Left.

Among these four parties, which form a clear majority in parliament and together have an unquestionable claim to public legitimacy, SYRIZA is the party that expresses best the electoral mood. And so the other parties should allow SYRIZA to form a government – most sensibly as part of a four-party government coalition but, failing this, even as a minority government with forbearance by the rest. Allow SYRIZA to form a government and try to deliver on what

the party has promised before the elections and on what the Greek public has demanded with the election result that it produced: a renegotiation of the memorandum within the Eurozone, which will allow a softer fiscal consolidation and a stronger emphasis on growth. It takes many kilos of optimism to see this happening, but the alternatives may weigh tonnes of misery in the weeks, months and years to come...

PS: Thinking about party tactics, this option of a SYRIZA-led government doesn't look too implausible. PASOK would be more averse to placing SYRIZA at the centre of government, but given that the last thing it wants is fresh elections (and also, in order to be consistent with its "for the sake of the country" discourse) it will find it difficult to say no. For New Democracy, cooperating with SYRIZA kills many birds with one stone: helping SYRIZA deliver the final blow to PASOK thus keeping New Democracy as the only remaining 'old' party of power; putting the austerity-sceptics in the spotlight and thus allowing them to be discredited (in the same way that New Democracy lost credibility by supporting the Papadimos government); and keeping with their message of "country before party". For the Democratic Left, this is also their opportunity to pursue the – by the way, much more coherent – anti-austerity / pro-Europe manifesto and signal their relevance in the political scene. And for SYRIZA, it is the opportunity to put their money where their mouth is and show that there is substance to their claim that they have a proposal for the future of the country.