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Elections of 17 June: The decisive turning point of the confrontation

The forthcoming electoral contest is even more important than the recent poll. The elections scheduled for 17 June may prove to be the 'main quake' rather than an 'aftershock'. The elections of 6 May ushered in a new historical period of a transitional nature. The collapse of the two-party system that prevailed in Greece since the restoration of democracy in 1974 will lead in the medium-term to the emergence of a new polarization. It is this that will crystallize – both politically and electorally – the *new divisive rift* embedded in Greek society by the Memorandum.

In the context of Greece's contemporary electoral history, the political vacuum seen today, on account of the deconstruction of the party system, is equivalent if not greater than the corresponding void that appeared in the Greek political scene in 1950 and 1974. The big difference between this and earlier historical periods lies in the fact that the Left is today at the center of developments, not on the fringe.

In the pre-dictatorship period, the founding of the Centre Union party in 1961 deprived the United Democratic Left (ΕΔΑ) of its position as the primary political representative of the vanquished National Liberation Front political movement (ΕΑΜ) and limited its political role in the political crisis that erupted in the mid-1960s. Similarly, in the period 1974-1977, when the institutional framework of the post-dictatorship system of government was formulated and the correlation of political forces was cemented for 35 years, the Left again found itself on the political margin. In 1974, the current of the center-left of Andreas Papandreou, formed in the circumstances of the political crisis of 1965 and radicalized during the period of the anti-dictatorship struggle, was to dominate not only the historically bankrupt Center but also the Left, which had become even weaker, following the new defeat at the hands of the military junta and the major split of 1968.

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The current crisis of the Right

At the beginning of the post-dictatorship period, the Right, united under the leadership of a strong personality, handled the transition to democracy, put its stamp on developments and triumphed in elections. Today, in sharp contrast, the 'pole' of the Right has plunged into a very deep crisis which looks set to continue. It remains fragmented, with a low-caliber leadership and highly tainted political personnel. Ideologically, it has been weakened by the crisis of neoliberalism engendered by the economic crisis. It should be noted that the three currents into which the Right is divided (figuratively speaking, the 'popular right', the 'far right' and the 'neoliberal right') are split into seven party formations. However, what is clearly of greater political importance is the fact that the Memorandum has deeply divided the Greek Right. It is quite remarkable that the balance of pro- and anti-Memorandum forces within its party formations is estimated at 55%-45%.

Consequently, the unification of the 'center-right' which is being attempted around the axis of New Democracy and – at least for now – under the leadership of Antonis Samaras does not seem very likely, while a return to its post-civil war ideological arsenal would appear to be completely ineffective. The crisis on the pole of the Right cannot be resolved either easily or immediately. The process for this too will be set in motion after the coming elections.

Overturning of the Center – Left relationship

At the same time, the recent elections also overturned the Center – Left relationship which was established in the early 1960s with the formation of the Centre Union at the expense of the United Democratic Left and became firmly rooted both socially and politically during the post-dictatorship period with the rise of PASOK. But the historic collapse of PASOK, which constituted the main political result of the aforesaid period, has overturned the situation and constitutes a point of no return. Today, there is little likelihood of a repetition of a (social democratic) "Centre Union experiment" in a modern version. Whilst on account of the economic and social crisis the prospect of a reconstitution of the center or middle ground in conditions of polarization does not seem feasible.

In this political landscape, the Left, spearheaded by SYRIZA, has now been elevated to one of the poles of the political scene now in the process of polarization. The crisis facing the old political forces favors – for the first time since the war – the emergence of a new Left, on terms quite different to those that applied not only since the restoration of democracy but also during the pre-dictatorship period. This means that there exist, for the first time in decades, objective political possibilities for the emergence of a new mass party of the Left, which in effect will result from the amalgamation and reconstitution of different historical currents. From this point of view, the ideological self-placement of current SYRIZA voters is particularly interesting (Figure 1).

SYRIZA's social base

The new SYRIZA brings together the most dynamic segments of the electorate. It constitutes the new social bloc of anti-Memorandum forces which is presently being shaped. Its support within Greek society is concentrated in the economically active population of the country and the productive age groups. It is the leading party among salaried employees of the public sector (22%) and private sector (18%), the unemployed (22%) and young people (20%). But also among those middle strata whose class has been downgraded by the economic crisis (18%).

It is the party of Greece's metropolitan areas, receiving 21% of the vote in Attica (against 13.2% for New Democracy and 8.9% for PASOK). It is striking that SYRIZA topped the poll in all municipalities of the Athens conurbation, with the sole exceptions of the four municipalities with a purely upper-class social composition (Ekali-Kifissia, Filothei-Psychico, Papagou-Holargos, Vari-Voula-Vouliagmeni). The electoral geography of the party in the Attica basin clearly corresponds to the social division of the region: its highest percentages of the vote were recorded in the working class/lower income Western districts of Athens and Piraeus, while its lowest were in the affluent Northeastern and Southeastern districts. Results that appear to show a sharper electoral/social gradation than that of PASOK in the 1980s. The same geographical/social cleavage is also evident in SYRIZA's electoral support in the municipality of Athens.

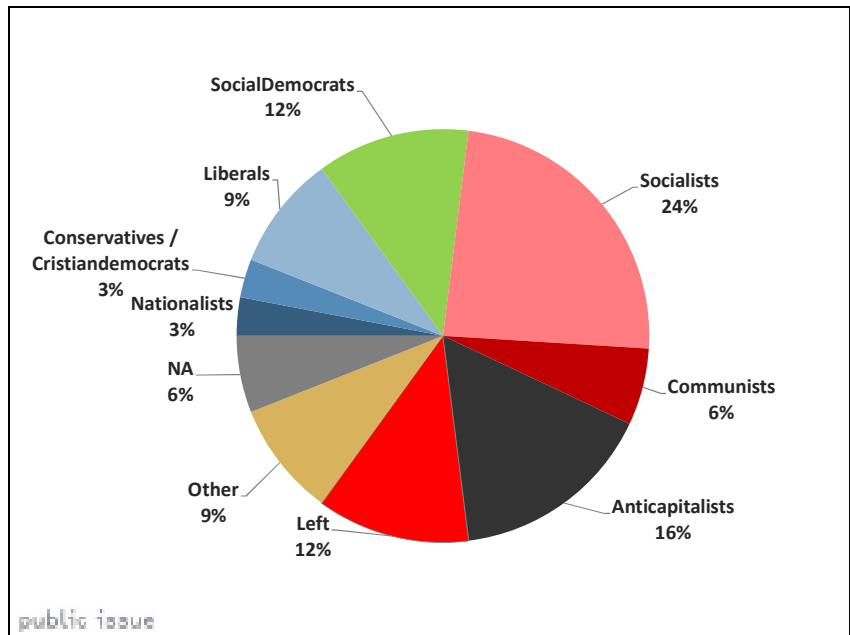
The new electoral momentum

The momentum created by the election result continues to strengthen the trend already recorded (bandwagon effect). The electoral surge that propelled SYRIZA to 17% may now take the form of a torrent. If this happens, then the upcoming electoral contest may very likely be won by a new party of the Left, which will represent **at least ¼** of the electorate. This means that the current crisis of representation may be resolved, electorally, for the first time to the benefit of the Left. In June, SYRIZA will constitute the predominant political crystallization of a new and enlarged social alliance. It may become a mass party of the Left – something which would have Europe-wide importance – but without the corresponding organization.

The pre-dictatorship crisis of representation which was exacerbated by the military junta, was resolved in the three-year period 1974-1977 in favor of PASOK and at the expense of the Left. From **13.4%** in 1974, PASOK surged to **25.3%** in 1977. It thus managed to make its mark on the political scene as an alternative solution for the country's governance, by prevailing over the remnants of the pre-dictatorship Center and marginalizing the weakened Left. The process of resolution, which in the post-dictatorship period took three years, may today be completed in just one month.

After the elections of 6 May, political time has been accelerated. The momentum that will build in the next 20 days is equivalent to a decade. The impact of this on the domestic, European and international political scene will be catalytic. Undoubtedly, such a development inevitably gives rise to a backlash. The 'holy alliance' against SYRIZA, which already became apparent during the process of the exploratory mandates to form a government, constitutes a first indication. The upcoming elections will be more polarized and it is highly likely that no political force is prepared. Without exaggeration, no party of the Left in Greece has found itself facing such responsibilities since the period of the United Democratic Left (ΕΔΑ), perhaps even the Nazi occupation.

FIGURE 1: SYRIZA voters. Ideological self-placement



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