

Greece's conservative party wins big in national elections

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Supporters of the New Democracy party were in a celebratory mood as exit polls suggested they were well ahead in the election [Louiza Vradi/Reuters]

Athens, May 22 (RHC)-- Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said his conservative party had unleashed a "political earthquake" with a big win in Sunday's election but hinted that he would seek another election in order to secure an absolute majority that would allow the party to govern alone.

With most votes counted, his New Democracy party was on 40.8 percent of the votes — a 20-point lead over the left-wing Syriza party of Alexis Tsipras, which had 20.1 percent.

Despite the clear lead, projections from Greece's interior ministry showed New Democracy falling six seats short of an outright majority in parliament, leaving Mitsotakis with the choice of building a coalition or bringing about a new ballot for a decisive result.

The 55-year-old made clear his preference. "The citizens want a strong government with a four-year horizon," he said. "Today's political earthquake calls on all of us to speed up the process for a definitive government solution," he added.

Tsipras also indicated a new vote was likely, saying "the electoral cycle is not over yet". The next battle, he said, will be "critical and final."

From Monday, Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou will give the top three parties — New Democracy, Syriza and the socialist PASOK — three days each in turn to form a coalition government. If they all fail, Sakellariopoulou will appoint a caretaker government to prepare new elections about a month later.

Earlier in the day, as exit polls suggested New Democracy was on track to emerge as the biggest party in parliament, its officials indicated they would prefer to seek a second vote. "We have said that we want to govern outright because that would ensure stability and the way forward. So we have the right to ask the Greek people for that in the next election," Public Order Minister Takis Theodorikakos said on Skai television shortly after polls closed Sunday evening.

The election was held under a new law of proportional representation, which makes it particularly difficult for any party to win enough parliamentary seats to form a government on its own.

If a second election is held, probably in late June or early July, the law will change again, shifting to a system that rewards the leading party with bonus seats and making it easier for the frontrunner to secure a parliamentary majority.

Sunday's election is the first in Greece since its economy ceased being under strict supervision by international lenders who had provided bailout funds during the country's nearly decade-long financial crisis.

Mitsotakis, a 55-year-old Harvard-educated former banking executive and global management firm consultant, won the last election in 2019 on a promise of business-oriented reforms and has promised to continue tax cuts, boost investments and bolster middle-class employment.

His popularity took a hit following a February 28 rail disaster that killed 57 people after an intercity passenger train was accidentally put on the same rail line as an oncoming freight train. It was later revealed that train stations were poorly staffed and safety infrastructure broken and outdated.

Thousands of people, many of them university students like the railway disaster victims, staged rallies across Greek cities in protest at what they saw as negligence on the part of the government. Still, with the economy growing at 5.9 percent in 2022, and unemployment and inflation falling, opinion polls showed the prime minister steadily ahead in the run-up to the election.

George Tzogopoulos, lecturer at the Democritus University of Thrace, told Al Jazeera that young people were dissatisfied with the political class as a whole. "But what happened is that they didn't show up and vote, they expressed their anger with demonstrations or through social media [instead]," he said.

"This is how New Democracy managed to score such an impressive success," Tzogopoulos added.

Turnout reached 60 percent, with abstentions lower than earlier feared.

Welcoming the results, 62-year-old retiree Glykeria Tzima said: “Democracy won today — not only New Democracy, but democracy as a whole. “We want to see a continuation of what was created in the last four years and leave the toxicity behind us. We, us Greeks, went through tough times and we saw that with this government and this prime minister, we have a future.”

University student Petros Apostolakis, however, was disappointed. “I’m not very happy [with the results] ... For the past few years, I’ve seen [the] New Democracy party implementing agendas that have nothing to do with the interests of my generation,” he told Al Jazeera in Athens, citing climate change and the steep housing prices as some of the issues that had been neglected.

Tsipras was prime minister during some of the most tumultuous years of Greece’s economic crisis, but the 48-year-old struggled to regain the wide support he enjoyed when he swept to power in 2015 on a promise of reversing bailout-imposed austerity measures.

In some areas, the party trailed the third-ranked but once-dominant Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), led by 44-year-old Nikos Androulakis.

Senior Syriza official Dimitris Papadimoulis, a European Parliament vice president, told state TV ERT that if confirmed, the result would be “significantly far” from the party’s goals and would mark a failure to rally opposition to the government.

PASOK is likely to be at the centre of any coalition talks, although any discussions are likely to be challenging. Androulakis has a poor relationship with Mitsotakis, whom he accuses of covering up a wiretapping scandal in which his phone was targeted for surveillance. His relationship with Tsipras — whom he has accused of trying to poach PASOK voters — is also rocky.

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