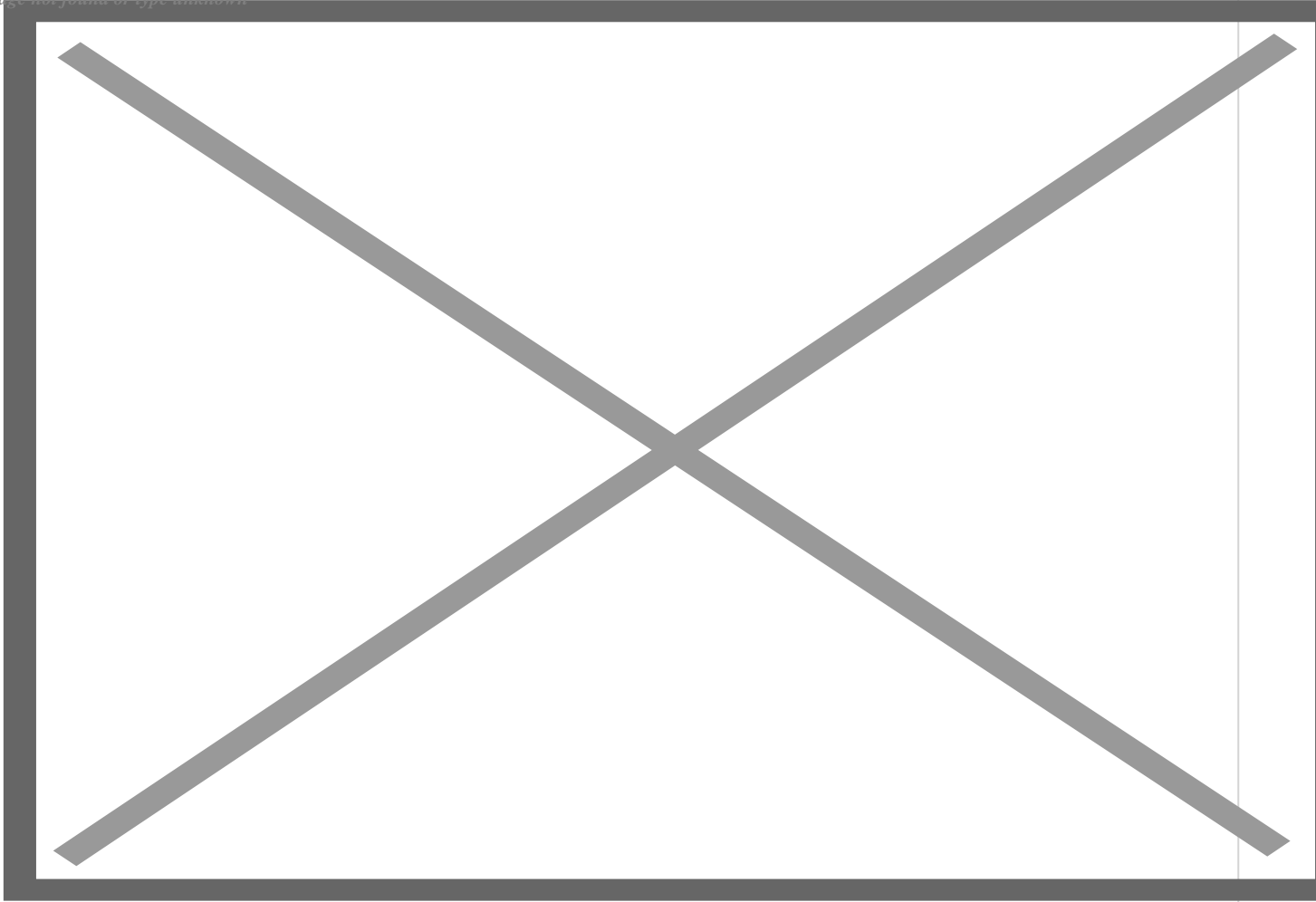


Greece's top court bans far-right party from upcoming elections

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Far-right former lawmaker Ilias Kasidiaris was convicted as a leading member of the extreme right Golden Dawn party [File: Yorgos Karahalis/Reuters]

Athens, May 4 (RHC)-- Greece's Supreme Court has agreed to ban the far-right Greeks (Hellenes) Party from participating in the country's upcoming general election, scheduled to take place on May 21st. The court's assembly ruled by a majority of nine to one to uphold amendments adopted by parliament in February, which disqualify parties led by politicians convicted of serious offences, as well as ones that

would not “serve the free functioning of [Greece’s] democratic constitution.”

Under those terms, imprisoned former lawmaker Ilias Kasidiaris and his Greeks Party will not be allowed to participate in the vote, despite polling above the 3 percent threshold required to gain representation in parliament. The ban, broadly supported by Greece’s mainstream political parties, was upheld despite a last-minute change in the Greeks Party leadership.

Former assistant Supreme Court prosecutor Anastasios Kanellopoulos, 75, replaced Kasidiaris last month as the Greeks Party’s leader and announced plans to revise the party’s charter. The decision could affect the outcome of the election, since the winning party is likely to have an easier time forming a new government with fewer parties represented in the national legislature.

Conservative Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis is seeking a second term in the election. His centre-right New Democracy Party (Néa Dimokratía) is leading in opinion polls but is unlikely to achieve an outright victory.

The nationalist leader, Kasidiaris, founded the Greeks Party after receiving a 13-year prison sentence in 2020. He was convicted as a leading member of an extreme right party, Golden Dawn (Chrysí Avgí), for the murder of anti-fascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas and other crimes including murder, assault and running a criminal organization.

He was sentenced to 13.5 years behind bars but has communicated to his supporters through voice messages from prison and a YouTube channel with more than 120,000 followers.

In an online post following the leadership change, Kasidiaris welcomed Kanellopoulos’s nomination, adding that he planned to seek a parliamentary seat in next month’s election. Greek law allows most prison inmates to retain their political rights.

Before the ruling, he had denounced “an unimaginable coup against democracy” by those trying to deny a voice to “hundreds of thousands of voters” supportive of his party.

Government spokesman Giannis Oikonomou told television channel Skai last month that “there must be no room for knife-wielding, neo-Nazi, criminal organizations to deceive the Greek justice system.” “A sufficient framework exists to deny any criminal organisation ? regardless of the cloak it chooses to wear ? the [opportunity] to seek the vote of the citizens ... but we remain on alert to make any [legal] changes needed,” Oikonomou said.

The banning of a party from a Greek election is believed to be a first since the restoration of democracy in 1974 following a military dictatorship.

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