

## PROFILE

Costas Simitis

## Greece's Mr Chinaman

A FEW foreign correspondents in Athens recall a particular evening in October 1981, just after the first Greek Socialist government's election victory, when the rookie cabinet was feted at the Foreign Press Association.

Attention focused on the freshly-minted farm minister, almost the only one of the new power élite who did not talk much but never relaxed his ingratiating toothy grin.

That is how the Greek and international public got to know Constantine – Costas for short – Simitis.

At the time, few could have guessed that this combination of smiles and technocratic dead-seriousness would propel Simitis, like the legendary Odysseus, unscathed through the witches' kitchen of Greek politics to assume the premiership in January 1996 at the age of 60.

Simitis may look and sound Greek, but he does not act like a Greek. In a volatile country where politics have always been theatre and heroes are set up for the mere pleasure of knocking them down, Simitis is the anti-hero. Coming up to no more than shoulder height on most other European leaders, he is no orator and has never pretended to be one. But the strongest thing his enemies have been able to throw at him is the nickname 'Kinezos' (Chinaman), a back-handed tribute to his inscrutability and undoubted political cunning – not to mention his sallow complexion.

And while other politicians in theatreland have inevitably become media addicts, Simitis has never sought such exposure. According to close associates, this is more cool calculation than temperament.

"The media and political establishment in Greece have always had this very incestuous relationship," says economist Ioannis Spraos, a close associate. "Simitis is the only political figure I know who refuses to play the media game."

The Greek political stage has, however, become a duller place since Simitis – the quintessential man in the grey suit – quietly manoeuvred his way up the olive oil-smeared pole to supplant the ailing founder of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok), Andreas Papandreou, in January 1996. Papandreou had been the consummate grandstand master. His larger-than-life role had thrilled and titillated Greeks and foreigners alike with its heady mix of champagne Socialism, anti-American rhetoric and his 1988 marriage to a blonde Olympic Airways hostess. How could Simitis follow an act like that?

Born in June 1936 in the port of Piraeus, Simitis soaked up left-wing ideology from his father, a law professor who became a leading member of the Communist-led insurgency which tried to seize power in a bloody civil war in the 1940s, but was defeated by Greek nationalists with British and American aid.

Oddly, for someone closely connected with the anti-Nazi resistance in his youth, Simitis junior chose to study in Germany, entering the academic world as a law lecturer at Marburg University in 1959. After a brief tenure at the London School of Economics, Simitis returned to Greece ready to translate his political ideas into action.

The Greece of the mid-1960s was wracked with political turbulence as a US-backed constitutional monarchy and conservative democratic establishment tried, by fair means or foul, to thwart the rising left. The Gordian knot was slashed in April 1967 by the Colonels, who inaugurated a seven-year military-backed dictatorship.

After a time spent wearing false beards and tossing a few bombs about, Simitis eluded a court martial and escaped abroad, where he quickly joined Papandreou's budding anti-junta organisation, the Panhellenic Resistance Movement (PAK) – the embryo of today's Pasok.

But however attracted by Papandreou's rhetoric, once in government Simitis almost at once began entertaining

serious doubts about the leader's economic wisdom. The break came in 1988 when he resigned from the key national economy ministry after Papandreou ordered him to loosen the purse-strings for an upcoming election, and throw the entire national budget out of kilter as a result.

"My arithmetic and the prime minister's do not agree," was his sole public comment, delivered in his trademark academic style of understatement.

A cautious man by temperament, Simitis remained deaf to pleas from associates for him to challenge Papandreou for the Pasok leadership, or even form a new party. Such moves would, at the time, have been political suicide.

But he never regained the leader's trust. When Papandreou earned a second spell as premier in the early 1990s, Simitis was in and out of the doghouse at the master's whim. But the master was declining and when he sank into

his final illness at the end of 1995, it was to the unflappable Simitis that the insecure Socialist rank and file turned. First came the post of replacement prime minister in January 1996, followed by party leader a few months later and then re-election as prime minister in his own right.

Cautious and conciliatory Simitis may be, but the other side of the coin is an indecisiveness which has lopped points off his approval ratings for his conduct of both economic and foreign policy.

On the plus side of his premiership is dramatic success in fighting inflation. Long the highest in the EU, it has been slashed from over 12% to less than 5% in two years.

But privatisation is lagging badly, despite pleas from technocrat ministers and no end of think-tanks, and increasingly strident urgings from Brussels. Pensioners and manual workers are complaining bitterly, which means the Pasok Party's influential left wing is being kept on a leash only with difficulty.

Bitter are the denunciations from the left, which accuses Simitis of having abandoned the workers' cause, and is why he still dare not rile the powerful unions. Although he faces the left-right policy conundrums common to Europe's other left-of-centre leaders, Simitis has so far backed away from vital labour and fiscal reforms as soon as the Pasok left has issued its Cerberian growls.

Then there is the chronic dispute with Turkey over very real and serious problems of sovereign rights in the Aegean Sea and divided Cyprus, issues that so far have defied even the considerable diplomatic talents of America's star regional troubleshooter, Richard Holbrooke.

Confronted by a Greek media establishment which whips up anti-Turkish fever on the slightest pretext, Simitis has had more reason than ever to avoid the limelight.

His Turkish policy has been signally unsatisfying to the public, as evidenced by his 75-minute meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz in Crete earlier this month when both leaders merely agreed to keep on disagreeing. "I don't think anyone will be gunning for me back in Athens," Simitis quipped after the meeting. But they were.

Conciliation has proved politically risky in a country whose electorate, egged on by an often irresponsible media, would love its leader to be a Turk-basher. But he leaves shooting from the hip to his burly foreign minister, Theodore Pangalos.

Many Greeks cannot quite forgive Simitis for saying 'thank you' to the US government after it helped deflect a Greek-Turkish armed clash over the ownership of a few square metres of Aegean rock in January 1996. Simitis was thrown in at the deep end, and has never quite recovered.

Washington is happy enough that Greece and Turkey are still talking, but the cost to Simitis at home is great. A poll by Flash FM, a mildly

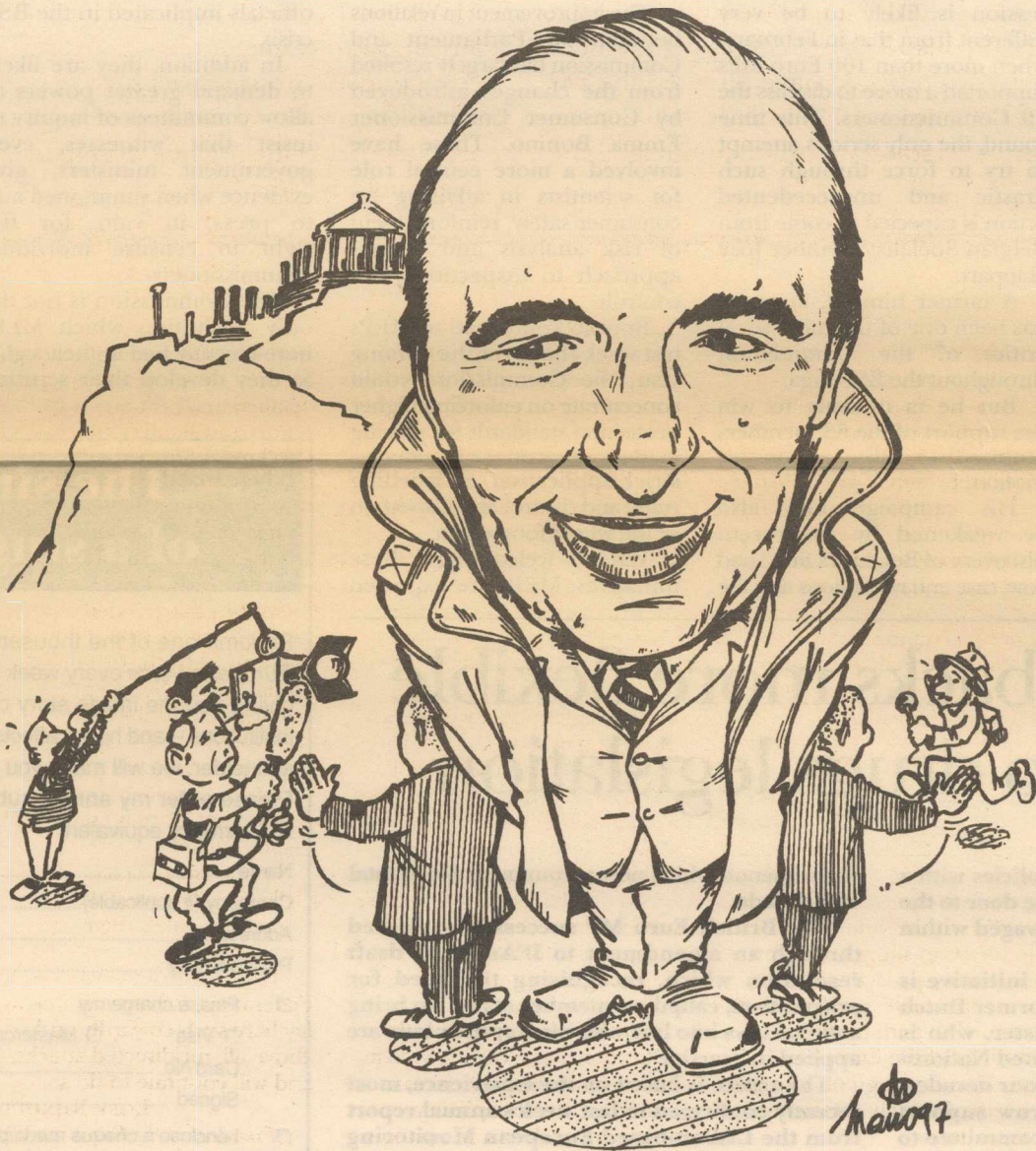
pro-government Athens radio station, found he garnered a mere 9% approval rate for his conduct of foreign policy.

But he does not have too much to worry about in the short term. Thanks more to a spiritless and squabbling Conservative opposition than to any signal achievements of his own government, Simitis is fairly secure in his job until the next elections scheduled for the autumn of 2000.

His score in the poll was actually the second highest of any Greek political figure (outdone only by Pangalos).

The ultimate test of his premiership will, however, be whether he can knock enough heads together to forge Greece's immature Socialist Party into a solid social democrat institution; pare down the massive government deficit left by the disastrous Papandreou era so that Greece can join the EU single currency by 2001; and wean the Greeks away from their confrontation mentality towards Turkey.

It will take more than a quiet, technocratic attitude and an inscrutable grin to pull that off.



**23 June 1936:** Born in Athens

**1959:** Graduated from University of Marburg (Germany)

**1961:** Greek Supreme Court lawyer

**1965:** Co-founder of Alexandros Papanastasiou Society

**1967-69:** Clandestine action against the junta.

**1971:** Professor at Justus Liebig University (Giessen)

**1974:** Founder member of Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok)

**1977-81:** Professor of Commercial Law at Panton University of Political Sciences (Athens)

**1981-85:** Minister of agriculture

**1985-87:** Minister of national economy

**1989:** Minister of education

**1993-94:** Minister of industry, energy, technology and commerce

**18 Jan 1996:** Prime minister.