

FINANCIAL TIMES

April 10, 2012 7:31 pm

Greece's challenge

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It was a short and troubled journey, but it may now be over. This week, five months after his appointment as the technocratic prime minister of Greece, Lucas Papademos is expected to ask the country's head of state, Karolos Papoulias, to call an election. It will then be up to the political parties to make their case in front of increasingly sceptical voters.

Recent polls bear no good news for the two main parties, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) and the centre-right New Democracy. Neither of them can expect to win a clear majority. Their joint share of the vote may even be insufficient to form a two-party coalition government.

Of course, the actual election results may be very different from what volatile opinion polls suggest. And, anyway, a protest vote was likely to be widespread, given the economic climate. With the country in its fifth consecutive year of recession and with more austerity ahead, fringe parties are bound to capitalise on deep voter disillusionment.

However, Greece's leading parties have only themselves to blame for their lack of support. Instead of rejuvenating their ranks, they are fielding much the same political class that was responsible for the crisis. So far, their message to the electorate has also been ineffective. They claim to support the programme that Greece has agreed with the International Monetary Fund and Brussels in exchange for a €130bn loan. But, at the same time, they shy away from making a positive case for its importance to the country's future.

Defending the programme is not easy. The package has many flaws and is unlikely to meet its stated targets. The demands of the Greek electorate – which remains in favour of staying in the eurozone, but against austerity – are difficult to reconcile.

But this year's elections are the only chance for Greece to generate genuine political will behind the reform agenda. While there are obvious costs to staying in the eurozone, the alternative is also extremely painful. If Pasok and New Democracy believe Greece's future is in the currency bloc and that the programme is the only way to achieve this aim, they must say so.

As Athens approaches primary balance – so that there is no need for external funds to pay for the domestic budget – the country's future will soon be in its own hands. These elections are a chance for politicians to spell out their vision. After too many excuses it is time for them to set a lead.

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