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Only a new political order can rescue Greece

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Why is Greece sleepwalking to disaster? As a Greek citizen I have been aware for years of the dire state of our public finances. Yet the political system failed to react, just as it has failed to produce a coalition government. The June election is a gamble because the extremist parties have the initiative. How did we come to this? The reasons lie in three largely unnoticed facts about Greek political life.

The first is the cultivation of hatred. A legacy of the civil war of 1946 to 1949 was the persistent and humiliating persecution of the left. Greek society in the 1950s was deeply hierarchical along lines of family and class. During the cold war another hierarchy was put in place. Leftwingers and other nonconformists were considered dangerous and unpatriotic and were persecuted by an apparatus of oppression that was dismantled only with the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974.

When the Socialists won power in 1981 they created a new hierarchy. Left supporters were now given civil service jobs, promotions and government contracts. The right was branded dangerous and unpatriotic.

The rhetoric of hatred survives today. Greek public life is still theatrical and poisonous. The parties of the left speak of the EU bailout as a “barbaric act” and a “crime”. Parties of the extreme right call pro-EU leaders “traitors” and “collaborators”. Their rhetoric rarely pauses to ask what caused the debt crisis or how it can be resolved. Forming a coalition would question everyone’s official outrage.

Partisan rivalry has paved the way for the second relevant fact: the rise of majoritarianism. Greece has had a liberal constitution since 1864. The rivalries of left and right, however, have brought constitutional checks and balances to the brink of irrelevance. This makes coalition government extremely hard to set up. The civil service is radically politicised and subservient. The public procurement of services and goods is ultimately in the hands of government ministers. Governments appoint the heads of the judiciary on partisan grounds. The result is a dysfunctional administrative system that depends on politics for everything.

The third political event is the decline of the press. Until 1989 radio and television were a government monopoly. After a series of inconclusive court battles, some businessmen started broadcasting terrestrial TV programmes. They were effectively stealing the frequencies. The government of the day did not react. Eight stations were given “temporary licences” in 1993, which were renewed in 2007. The highest court ruled in 2010 that the temporary licenses are

unconstitutional. The ruling brought no change. Politicians have been afraid to rock the boat. How does this tawdry episode mark the demise of the press? The TV stations absorbed the print media. Most do not respect rules for objectivity or moderation. Owner interference is rampant and blatantly self-serving. The heated rhetoric of the politicians is reproduced and enhanced by TV journalists. There is little room for reflection or consensus.

The cultivation of hatred, the rise of majoritarianism and the demise of the press jointly explain the present paralysis in the face of the crisis. Greek politics has been privatised. Unscrupulous politicians, cynical trade unions and media oligarchs have hijacked our public life. They cared little about the debt and even less about reform. They see no urgency in preventing a catastrophic euro exit. Given their extravagant gains, the internal distribution of resources is far more important to them than the overall size of the pie.

This is why the two main political parties collapsed in the May election. They are symbols of ineptitude and corruption. They do not have the moral authority to ask for sacrifices. The electorate is fed up with austerity, but it is livid at being led by those who dishonestly caused the problem. So even though 80 per cent of the electorate wants to stay in the euro, 68 per cent voted for parties that oppose the bailout deal. This was their way of voting for change.

The old has died but the new is not yet born. Prime minister George Papandreou's sudden departure in November took everyone by surprise. Few expected the rapid decline of the socialists and the conservatives, who are entering the electoral campaign shaken and entirely bereft of energy and ideas. The shameless populism of the radical left may secure increased support for a while, but can only lead to spectacular failure. The Greek crisis is now political.

The answer lies only in the emergence of new and credible political parties. We should be aiming to restore faith in our democratic institutions, clean up the media, punish the corrupt and give hope of a productive and competitive economy. The Greek electorate is wise in demanding complete and swift renewal.

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