

THE Guardian 23/9 p. 7

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Greek opposition leader quits after conceding defeat

# Close race ends in victory for Pasok

Helena Smith in Athens

**T**HE Greek Socialist party Pasok held on to power last night in a close general election race against the main opposition New Democracy Party.

After early exit polls gave the Socialists, led by the prime minister Costas Simitis, about 42 per cent of the vote, the opposition conservatives conceded defeat.

Miltiades Evert announced that he was resigning from the leadership of New Democracy.

If the exit polls are confirmed, Mr Simitis will have more than 159 deputies in the 300-seat parliament — down from the present 170 seats, but still with an absolute majority.

In the month-long campaign, Greeks expressed disaffection with the main parties and an unprecedented number of first-time voters told pollsters that they would cast blank "protest" ballots. The percentage of spoiled ballots was not known last night.

The death in June of the

previous prime minister, Andreas Papandreou, made yesterday's election the first without one of the political giants who have controlled Greece since its independence from Turkey in 1833.

"This is the first time Pasok has won a national victory without Andreas Papandreou," said his son, George.

Mr Simitis replaced Papandreou as Pasok leader in January after openly challenging his style and views. Since then he has emerged as one of Greece's most popular politicians, winning praise for his reform programmes.

A former commercial law professor, aged 60, Mr Simitis called the election a year early, seeking a new mandate to consolidate his power and press ahead with domestic and foreign policy decisions.

The election, aides said, was his biggest political gamble since he helped found Pasok from an anti-junta resistance group in 1974.

But while his determination to transform Greece into a modern European Union state has been welcomed, his

lacklustre campaign performance often seemed to alienate supporters.

After decades of being treated to the rousing speeches of Papandreou, voters found Mr Simitis disconcertingly deadpan and many appeared ready to support the smaller parties.

Analysts said they expected Dikki, a populist socialist splinter group set up earlier this year, to take some votes from Pasok.

In another twist to the election, Mr Evert, a former Athens mayor, shamelessly plundered Pasok's electoral tricks. While Mr Simitis spoke of the need to rein in the enormous budget deficit, Mr Evert adopted a populist platform of costly promises.

With 20 per cent of voters undecided on the eve of the poll, Mr Simitis tried to win support by invoking Papandreou's memory.

Certainly, Pasok's victory has not been without the help of the aura of Papandreou, with whom Mr Simitis so publicly clashed before becoming his successor.