

## Democratic Transition in Greece

**Abstract** Since its independence in 1830, Greece's path towards democratic consolidation has been non-linear and uneven. Following the collapse of the 1967–1974 military regime, a new democratic constitution was promulgated in 1975. Parliamentary debates on the constitutional draft reflected different approaches on the question of majoritarianism between the parties that would dominate Greek politics, New Democracy and PASOK. Despite its radical rhetoric, the rise of PASOK to power in 1981 did not question Greece's membership of Western organizations and NATO and did not affect the harmonious cooperation between the president and the prime minister.

**Keywords** PASOK · New democracy · Karamanlis · Papandreou  
Venizelos · Civil war

### INTRODUCTION

Greece comprises a rather interesting case in the study of democratic transitions, being the single case of involvement in all three forward and in both reverse democratization waves.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, Greece's constitutional history has been a reflection of the country's uneven and non-linear path towards democratic consolidation.

Since the fall of the 1967–1974 military regime, Greece has gone through the longest period of uninterrupted democratic rule in its

history. Following the promulgation of a republican constitution in 1975, its membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1981 proved to be one of the crucial anchors of Greece's democratic regime. One major (1986) and two minor constitutional amendments (2001 and 2008) have led to heated debates about majoritarianism but have not shaken the foundations of the post-1974 order. Only the economic crisis that has hit the country since 2009 has questioned the resilience of Greek democratic institutions and contributed to discussions about the root causes of the crisis and the role of the constitution.

### CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

Even before the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence in 1821, there had been a vibrant debate about the republican nature of the new regime and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms through the introduction of a constitution. While there were three revolutionary constitutions that attempted to establish a liberal democratic blueprint for the emerging Greek nation-state, these were eventually neglected, as the independence of Greece was conditioned upon the consent of European autocracies. Hence, according to the Protocol of London of 2 February 1830 and the Treaty of Constantinople of 9 July 1832, the independent Kingdom of Greece became an absolute monarchy. State building under the Triumvirate introduced to the underage King Otto von Wittelsbach followed the autocratic blueprint of post-Napoleonic Europe. Only after the 3 September 1843 revolution, was the young King Otto forced to grant a constitution (Fig. 2.1).

The first constitution of the Kingdom of Greece was promulgated on 18 March 1844, turning the country into a constitutional monarchy. While parliamentary elections were first held in summer 1844, it took decades before concrete steps towards the full and effective introduction of a parliamentary system and the emergence of the prime minister as a key power holder were made. The 1862 expulsion of King Otto was followed by the arrival of King George I from the royal house of Glücksburg and the promulgation of a new constitution in 1864. This provided the framework for an incipient Westminster-style parliamentary system in the 1870s, under the leadership of Charilaos Trikoupis. The king became obliged to appoint as prime minister the leader of the party with the strongest parliamentary representation.<sup>2</sup> Greece was



**Fig. 2.1** The 3 September 1843 Revolution-Colonel Dimitrios Kallergis demands a constitution from King Otto and Queen Amalia (Unknown artist, Museum of the City of Athens, Vouros-Eutaxias Foundation, Athens)

consolidating its position in the European state system as a British ally, and this facilitated the emergence of a British-style parliamentarism. Yet the political, social and diplomatic conditions of the late nineteenth century did not allow for quick steps, and the consolidation of Greek democracy would take longer than many would expect. Greece's painful economic default in 1893 and disastrous defeat against the Ottoman Empire in the 1897 war determined the political and diplomatic agenda of the country. Meanwhile, also due to the recurrent mobilizations, military influence upon politics increased, and coups became an increasingly common feature of Greek politics.<sup>3</sup> A perennial, internecine debate about the monarchical or republican character of the regime became intertwined with the recurring coups and was further punctuated by the country's participation in consecutive wars. War, coups and the conflict between monarchists and republicans left a heavy burden on Greek politics and society.

Yet a major constitutional overhaul had to wait until the aftermath of the 1909 Goudi military coup. The parliamentary elections

of 11 December (O.S. 28 November) 1910<sup>4</sup> and the meteoric rise of Eleftherios Venizelos, a politician that came from the island of Crete to promote a reformist agenda and eventually dominate Greek politics for more than two decades,<sup>5</sup> facilitated the rise of a constitutional debate. Contrary to the expectations of many of his supporters, Venizelos rejected the calls for the introduction of republicanism, as he considered the monarchy to be a crucial cementing factor in Greece. On the other hand, the overhaul of the 1864 constitutional text was substantial: Fifty-four articles were amended. While maintaining the monarchical character of the regime, the 1911 Constitution put forward a series of reforms that brought the Kingdom of Greece in line with the norm in most European states of its era.

Nevertheless, the restoration of the political role of the king would pave the ground for a series of political crises. The Balkan Wars (1912–1913), the First World War (1914–1918), the Greek-Turkish War (1919–1922), its subsequent population exchange and concomitant political turmoil left a heavy imprint on Greek politics and formed the background of a mounting conflict between the new King Constantine I and Prime Minister Venizelos. Political polarization reached the level of a constitutional crisis in 1915, when Constantine forced Venizelos into resignation twice in a year due to foreign policy disagreements, in particular Greece's entry into the First World War on the side of the Entente. The crisis peaked in August 1916 with the emergence of two governments, one in Athens under the influence of the King and one in Thessaloniki under the influence of Venizelos and the support of the Entente forces. The Venizelos government managed to prevail with Entente support in June 1917, after Greece had reached the verge of an outright civil war.

Constitutional debates often rotated around the question of monarchy vs. republicanism, due to the power struggle between King Constantine I and Prime Minister Venizelos. A first of a series of referendums on the monarchical or republican character of the regime was held in 1924 and was won by the republicans. The Second Hellenic Republic<sup>6</sup> was promulgated with the 1925 Constitution. It lasted for 11 years amidst recurring military coups, until a new referendum in 1935 restored the monarchy and the 1864/1911 Constitution.<sup>7</sup> On 4 August 1936, Ioannis Metaxas led yet another coup and suspended with the consent of King George II several articles of the constitution. Metaxas' military regime ruled over Greece until its occupation by German military forces in April–May 1941. Greece's tripartite (German, Italian and Bulgarian)

occupation ended in October 1944, but this did not mean a return to constitutional normalcy. In the end of the Second World War, Greece emerged as a member of the Western democratic camp, but only after having suffered a catastrophic three-year civil war, which left its traces upon its political regime and social fabric.<sup>8</sup> The 1946–1949 civil war did not only result in immense human loss and economic destruction. No national reconciliation followed suit, and the Greek left faced persecution and discrimination. This reinforced divisions within the Greek society and provided crucial symbolic resources for the polarization of Greek politics for decades, obstructing the emergence of social consensus on critical political questions and fostering majoritarian views.<sup>9</sup>

Greece's membership of the Western alliance and the framing of the emerging Cold War as war between "freedom" and "tyranny" also meant that Greece's return to democracy in the aftermath of the Second World War was imperative. Nevertheless, the 1952 constitution reflected the illiberal reality of its times; it remained formally democratic; yet its provisions were undermined by a body of extraordinary legislation, the "*parasyntagma*" or "parallel constitution", a remnant of the Civil War era that crucially undermined the rule of law and democracy. While the constitution referred to the protection of individual rights and the democratic nature of the regime, in practice human rights were often compromised to the interest of "national security" or "state interest". Despite its NATO membership in 1953, Greek democracy remained procedural, while its civil society faced severe institutional limitations<sup>10</sup>: Persecution of leftist dissidents, deportations and imprisonments were common, while mistrust about the free and fair character of parliamentary elections was also widespread. The ban of KKE, Greece's Communist Party, and severe limitations to freedom of expression were coupled by the tutelary role played by the Palace in collaboration with the military and civil bureaucracy. Palace interventions led into political crises with Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis in 1961 and Georgios Papandreou in 1965.<sup>11</sup> Political instability was used as a pretext for yet another military coup on 21 April 1967, which led to a seven-year junta regime. This coup was meant to have a deeper impact on Greek politics. In Latin American style, the colonels that led decided to rule over the country themselves, instead of ruling from behind by withdrawing from the political scene and installing entrusted politicians. During the seven years of the military regime, several attempts were made to introduce majoritarian elements with the aim to mitigate international

criticism about the undemocratic nature of the regime. Populism was widely applied by the junta, as the regime claimed to represent the “true interests” of the Greek people against its “morally corrupt” elites, which were responsible for Greece’s “plight”. Constitutional politics was one of the instruments the military regime used. Following the abortive attempt of King Constantine II to overthrow the military regime in December 1967 and his subsequent exile, the colonels appointed a regent, and Colonel Georgios Papadopoulos became prime minister. Within a few months, they submitted a draft of a new constitution to referendum. In the new constitution of May 1968, the military was bestowed upon a tutelary role, while fundamental rights and freedoms were further curtailed. In July 1973, following a second abortive counter-coup, Papadopoulos decided to depose King Constantine II whom he considered the mastermind of both anti-junta plots and turn Greece into a presidential republic with himself as a strong head of state and the executive. The new constitution introduced key majoritarian elements such as the direct election of the president and was put into a new referendum in July 1973, as the junta hoped to gain popular legitimacy.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the November 1973 overthrow of Papadopoulos by a group of his colleagues under Brigadier General Dimitrios Ioannidis led to the suspension of constitutional plans and the military rule of the country until July 1974. A humiliating military defeat in Cyprus following an instigated coup against the Makarios government and the subsequent Turkish invasion of the island on 20 July 1974 brought an abrupt end to Greece’s military regime. The new government under Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis had to restore the foundations of the Greek democracy. Through a referendum on 8 December 1974, monarchy was abolished, and a new constitution was promulgated on 11 June 1975.

### DEMOCRATIZATION REFORMS—THE ROLE OF THE CONSTITUTION

The advent of democracy in Southern Europe signalled a critical juncture in the democratization waves that swept through the European continent following the end of the Second World War. The trials of the military regime leaders pointed at the need to deliver justice while

maintaining the rule of law<sup>13</sup> and aiming at breaking the vicious circle of polarization and retribution.

Since shedding the vestiges of authoritarianism was one of the primary aims of the new democratic regimes, majoritarianism became a key item of the political debate and coincided with the rise of populism. Since the restoration of “popular sovereignty” against “corrupt elites” was a key political demand, it was often conflated with the introduction of majoritarian elements into Greece’s democratic regime. The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (*Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima*-PASOK), a left-wing party founded by Andreas Papandreou on 3 September 1974, would fast rise into a dominant position in Greek politics, with a populist agenda featuring majoritarian elements.<sup>14</sup>

This debate featured highly in the parliamentary deliberations before the promulgation of the 1975 Constitution and peaked in 1985, when the PASOK government put forward a constitutional amendment aiming to trim the powers of the president in favour of those of the prime minister and promote a more majoritarian model of Greek democracy. The vision of achieving “pure and complete popular sovereignty” through the elimination of executive powers as well as the balancing role of the president against the prime minister was presented as an indispensable consequence of the completion of the democratic consolidation process.

The deliberation about the new constitution was a central one in the context of transition.<sup>15</sup> The attack against Greek democracy was attributed to the antidemocratic activities of the Palace and key elements of the bureaucracy. While the republican character of the Greek state was decided by referendum, the reestablishment of Greek democracy on firm grounds would be enacted through a new constitution. The elimination of the tutelary functions of the military and civil bureaucracy was one of the main aims of the constitutional drafters. On the other hand, this did not mean that populist majoritarianism was favoured by all political parties. The Karamanlis administration did not intend to destroy existing bureaucratic structures in the name of democratization<sup>16</sup> and aspired to build Greece’s democratic regime on a delicate balance between the two heads of the executive, the prime minister and the president. While a parliamentary system was introduced, and the president was elected by qualified parliamentary majority, the president maintained considerable powers. Among the most significant powers, one could list the following:

- a. dissolve the Parliament, if he considered that its composition was in apparent disharmony with popular feelings or could not secure government stability (Article 41§1);
- b. dissolve the government when at his discretion there was no parliamentary majority (Article 38§2);
- c. convene the council of ministers under extraordinary circumstances (Article 42);
- d. ratify voted bills by the Parliament and refer back to the Parliament passed bills that he disagreed with (Article 42);
- e. declare a referendum on critical political issues, regardless of the intentions of the government majority (Article 42).<sup>17</sup>

These provisions underlined that Prime Minister Karamanlis and his incumbent New Democracy (*Nea Dimokratia*-ND) party did not view Greece's transition to democracy as a complete victory of populism and an opportunity to turn Greek democracy towards majoritarianism. While the country's Westminster-type parliamentary tradition was preserved, the powers granted to the president aimed to recalibrate the balance between the executive, the legislative and the judiciary<sup>18</sup> and prevent the rise of an omnipotent prime minister who could accumulate executive and legislative powers without any restraint. A balance between the two heads of the executive, the president and the prime minister, was meant to deter power concentration in the hands of either.

Yet this choice of the Karamanlis administration met with the vocal opposition of the left-wing parties that formed the minority of the parliament and participated in the constitutional deliberations. The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (*Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima*-PASOK) and the Communist Party of Greece (*Kommounistiko Komma Ellados*-KKE) argued that these provisions comprised a threat against the democratic nature of the regime and warned about the possibility of a top-level institutional crisis, if the views of the president and the prime minister differed on critical issues. Hence, they voiced their preference for a weaker, virtually ceremonial president and a stronger parliament and prime minister. As the leftist parties in the constitutional deliberations expressed their opposition to the balancing role of the president and advocated the full transfer of his powers to the parliament and the government, their argument was firmly based on a majoritarian view of politics. In their view, all powers should reside with the parliamentary majority and the government. They also aimed to limit the powers

of state bureaucracy and advocated a more thorough purge of military regime sympathizers, in contrast to the rather moderate approach of the conservative government.<sup>19</sup> This appeared to pose a risk of conflict, which had cost Greece dearly in the past. Despite these views, the conservative Karamanlis government insisted on the promulgation of a constitution that aimed to establish a checks-and-balances system between the president and the prime minister. Despite the parliamentary nature of the Greek democracy, the president retained crucial powers, which could play a balancing role against the government and the prime minister.

When the new constitution came into force in 1975, there was slim chance to check whether the new constitution harboured the potential of a conflict between the two heads of the executive, the president and the prime minister. President Konstantinos Tsatsos was elected with the support of the incumbent New Democracy party, and hence the probability of him clashing with Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis on key political issues was very low. Karamanlis himself was elected president in 1980 and would become the first president to test the functionality of the new constitution. In the parliamentary elections of 18 October 1981, the socialist PASOK, led by Andreas Papandreu, scored a historic victory collecting 48.1% of the vote and formed a single-party government.<sup>20</sup> The cohabitation of President Konstantinos Karamanlis and Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu was expected to produce recurrent, major political crises, given their deep ideological and political differences. Papandreu objected to Greece's membership of NATO and its recently accomplished accession to the European Economic Community (EEC). He suggested an alternative "third way" to achieve Greece's democratic and socialist transformation. In his rhetoric, no real democracy had been established in 1974, because the people were not truly empowered. The state elite which was responsible for the persecution of left-wing Greeks and contributed to the establishment and viability of the military regime was perceived to be the "enemy" still remaining in charge of the country. Only through the advent of PASOK to power would these elites lose their tutelary role, and true democracy be established. In that view, the bitter legacy of the military regime and the 1974 Cyprus crisis necessitated the dominant role of *volonté générale*, which was expressed by the incumbent party. In typical populist jargon, Papandreu argued that PASOK signed a "contract" with the "Greek people" thus claiming a unique and unprecedented affinity in Greek political history; PASOK was destined to fulfil the *volonté générale*, and this supreme and unfettered

goal came to the point of intolerance to the voices of non-elected bodies, or to bodies governed through seniority and merit, as opposed through explicitly majoritarian outcomes.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, despite this background and contrary to what many had expected, no constitutional crisis was observed. Papandreou abandoned most of its radical electoral promises, such as Greece's withdrawal from the European Economic Community (EEC) and NATO, and maintained Greece's Western and European orientation.<sup>22</sup> On his part, President Karamanlis abstained from using his veto powers against a series of comprehensive legislative reforms introduced by PASOK, which realized some of its electoral promises, in the direction of empowering the people against business and state elites.<sup>23</sup> This even referred to the dilution of the power of state bureaucracy and the inclusion of party clients.<sup>24</sup> A *modus vivendi* was apparently achieved; checks and balances seemed to be working smoothly, and this rendered good services to Greek political stability.

## NOTES

1. Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 54.
2. John S. Koliopoulos and Thanos M. Veremis, *Modern Greece: A History since 1821* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 44–46.
3. On the role of the military in Greek politics, see Thanos Veremis, *The Military in Greek Politics: From Independence to Democracy* (Montreal, New York & London: Blackrose Books, 1997).
4. Greece officially applied the Julian calendar in 1923, when 16 February moved to 1 March.
5. For more on the work and vision of Eleftherios Venizelos, see Paschalis M. Kitromilides, *Eleftherios Venizelos: The Trials of Statesmanship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).
6. Revolutionary Greece was considered as the First Hellenic Republic, given the republican character of all three revolutionary constitutions.
7. Nicos C. Alivizatos, *Το Σύνταγμα και οι Εχθροί του στη Νεοελληνική Ιστορία 1800–2010 [The Constitution and its Enemies in Modern Greek History 1800–2010]* (Athens: Πόλις [Polis], 2011).
8. John S. Koliopoulos and Thanos Veremis, *Greece, the Modern Sequel: From 1821 to the Present* (London: Hurst & Co., 2002), pp. 68–98.

9. Richard Clogg, *A Concise History of Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 145–150.
10. Nicos P. Mouzelis and George Pagoulatos, “Civil Society and Citizenship in Postwar Greece” in Faruk Birtek and Thalia Dragonas, eds., *Citizenship and the Nation State in Greece and Turkey* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 88–92.
11. Nicos C. Alivizatos, *Οι Πολιτικοί Θεσμοί σε Κρίση 1922–1974: Όψεις της Ελληνικής Εμπειρίας [Political Institutions under Crisis: Aspects of the Greek Experience]* (Athens: Θεμέλιο [Themelio], 1995).
12. Alivizatos, *Το Σύνταγμα και οι Εχθροί του στη Νεοελληνική Ιστορία 1800–2010 [The Constitution and its Enemies in Modern Greek History 1800–2010]*, p. 665.
13. Nicos C. Alivizatos and P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, “Politics and the Judiciary in the Greek Transition to Democracy” in A. James McAdams, ed., *Transitional Justice and the Rule of Law in New Democracies* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).
14. Both the choice of the word “movement” and not “party” and the foundation of the party on the anniversary of Greece’s first constitutional revolution of 3 September 1843 were deliberate moves to strengthen PASOK’s populist character.
15. On this, see P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, “Transition to, and Consolidation of, Democratic Politics in Greece, 1974–1983: A Tentative Assessment”, *West European Politics*, Vol. 7, no. 2 (1984).
16. Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, “Old Problems and New Challenges: The Enduring and Changing Functions of Southern European State Bureaucracies” in Richard Gunther, P. Nikiforos Diamandouros and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, eds., *Democracy and the State in the New Southern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 204–205.
17. Kostas Mavrias, “Οι Αναθεωρήσεις του Συντάγματος του 1975 [The Amendments of the 1975 Constitution]” in Hellenic Parliament [Βουλή των Ελλήνων], ed., *30 Χρόνια από το Σύνταγμα του 1975: Τα Ελληνικά Συντάγματα από το Ρήγα Έως Σήμερα [30 Years from the 1975 Constitution: Greek Constitutions from Rigas until Today]* (Athens: Hellenic Parliament [Βουλή των Ελλήνων], 2005), pp. 233–239.
18. On the role of judiciary in Greek democratization process, see Alivizatos and Diamandouros, “Politics and the Judiciary in the Greek Transition to Democracy”.
19. Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, “The Authoritarian Past and Contemporary Greek Democracy”, *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 15, no. 3 (2010), pp. 457–458.
20. On the impact of PASOK on state–society relations in Greece, see Nikiforos P. Diamandouros, “Pasok and State-Society Relations in

- Post-Authoritarian Greece, 1974–1988” in Speros Vryonis Jr., ed., *Greece on the Road to Democracy: From the Junta to Pasok* (New York: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1974).
21. For an excellent account of the transformation and the challenges that PASOK faced, see Yannis Voulgaris, *Η Ελλάδα της Μεταπολίτευσης 1974–1990 [Greece of the Transition 1974–1990]* (Athens: Θεμέλιο [Themelio], 2001).
  22. On the transformation of early third-worldist PASOK to a less radical government party, see Michalis Spourdalakis and Chrsanthos Tassis, “Party Change in Greece and the Vanguard Role of Pasok”, *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 11, no. 3 (2006), pp. 497–501.
  23. For example, legislation, which introduced the participation of labor unions in the management of “strategic” state-owned enterprises (SOEs), was justified on the grounds of serving “national interest and the social whole” and of enlisting SOEs in the struggle that PASOK had ostensibly launched against Greece’s domestic political and economic elite and its Western patrons. In the field of higher education, PASOK aimed to turn faculty unions and the student movement from outsiders to key stakeholders in its aim to “socialize the state”. Thus, majoritarian views spread within Greek higher education, inhibiting the administrative autonomy of universities, which came under the control of political parties, and harming academic pluralism and freedoms, as views opposing the dominant paradigm were barely tolerated. See, respectively, Demetrios B. Papoulias and Spyros Lioukas, “Participation in the Management of Public Enterprises: Experience from Greek Utilities”, *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*, Vol. 66, no. 3 (1995) and Ioannis N. Grigoriadis and Antonis Kamaras, “Reform Paradoxes: Academic Freedom and Governance in Greek and Turkish Higher Education”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (2012), p. 140.
  24. Sotiropoulos, “Old Problems and New Challenges: The Enduring and Changing Functions of Southern European State Bureaucracies”.

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