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Greece

Country:

Greece

Year:

2018

Freedom Status:

Free

Political Rights:

2

Civil Liberties:

2

Aggregate Score:

85

Freedom Rating:

2.0

Overview:

Greece's parliamentary democracy features vigorous competition between political parties and a strong if imperfect record of upholding civil liberties. Entrenched corruption has undermined state finances, leading external creditors to impose constraints on the country's fiscal policies. Other concerns include discrimination against immigrants and minorities as well as poor conditions for irregular migrants and refugees.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 35 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 12 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The largely ceremonial president is elected by a parliamentary supermajority for a five-year term. The prime minister is chosen by the president and is usually the leader of the largest party in the parliament. Current president Prokopis Pavlopoulos, a conservative former cabinet minister, was elected in February 2015. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras of the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) took office after January 2015 elections and won reelection in a snap vote in September of that year.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The 300 members of the unicameral Hellenic Parliament are elected to serve four-year terms through a mixture of 8 single-member constituencies, 48 multimember constituencies, and a national constituency with 12 seats. Under current electoral law, the party with the most votes receives a 50-seat bonus, which is designed to make it easier to form a governing majority.

In the September 2015 elections, which were considered free and fair, SYRIZA took 145 seats and renewed its ruling coalition with the right-wing populist Independent Greeks (ANEL) party, which won 10. The center-right opposition New Democracy (ND) party took 75 seats; the ultranationalist Golden Dawn won 18; the center-left Democratic Coalition, composed of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and the Democratic Left (DIMAR), took 17; the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), 15; the new center-left To Potami (the River), 11; and the Union of Centrists (EK), 9.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

The country has generally fair electoral laws, equal campaigning opportunities, and a weakly enforced system of compulsory voting. If passed with a two-thirds supermajority, changes to the electoral laws are implemented for the next elections. If passed with a simple majority, they go into effect in the following elections. An amendment that was passed in 2016 without a supermajority will abolish the 50-seat bonus that is awarded to the winning party. It will also lower the voting age from 18 to 17.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 15 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

The political system features vigorous competition among a variety of parties. Eight were represented in the parliament as of 2017. Many other parties participated in the last elections but did not reach the 3 percent vote threshold to secure representation.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

Greece has established a strong pattern of democratic transfers of power between rival parties, with PASOK and ND alternating in government for most of the past four decades. SYRIZA entered government for the first time in 2015.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 4 / 4

No group or institution from outside the political system exerts undue influence over the choices of voters and candidates.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4

Greece's largest recognized minority population, the Muslim community of Thrace, has full political rights, and four members of the community won seats in the last parliamentary elections. The authorities have rejected some ethnic minorities' attempts to secure official recognition or to register associations with names referring to their ethnic identity, affecting their ability to organize and advocate for their political interests, though such associations are generally able to operate without legal recognition. Since 2010, documented immigrants have been allowed to vote in municipal elections.

There are no significant legal or practical barriers to women's political participation. Women won about 20 percent of the seats in the 2015 parliamentary elections.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 8 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 3 / 4

Greek elected officials generally set and implement government policies. However, their fiscal policy choices in particular have been limited in recent years by the main creditor institutions that have guided the country through its public debt crisis—the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Greece was expected to exit its last bailout agreement with the institutions in 2018.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

Official corruption remains a problem in Greece, and institutions tasked with combating it lack the resources to operate effectively. Tax officials have been implicated in tax evasion schemes, which seriously complicate the government's fiscal reform efforts.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 3 / 4

A number of laws and government programs are designed to ensure the transparency of official decisions and provide public access to information. Officials are required to make public declarations of their assets and income. Corruption related to state contracts remains a concern; a number of former officials, including former cabinet ministers, were charged or found guilty during 2017 for contract-related bribery schemes.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 50 / 60 (+1)

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 14 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 3 / 4

The constitution includes provisions for freedoms of speech and the press, and these rights are generally protected. Citizens enjoy access to a broad array of privately owned print, broadcast and online news outlets. There are some limits on hate speech and related content. Defamation remains a criminal offense, and journalists face

defamation suits by political figures in practice. They are also sometimes subject to physical assaults, particularly while covering protests.

At the end of 2017, the government was preparing to hold new auctions for television licenses under the auspices of the independent National Council for Radio and Television. An earlier auction held without the regulator in 2016 had been nullified after the Council of State found that it was unconstitutional. Critics had accused the government of using the procedure to alter the media landscape in its favor.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 3 / 4

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, though the Greek Orthodox Church receives government subsidies and is considered the “prevailing” faith of the country. The constitution prohibits proselytizing, but this restriction is rarely enforced. Members of some minority religions face discrimination and legal barriers, such as permit requirements to open houses of worship. Opposition to the construction of an official mosque in Athens remains substantial; the project proceeded during 2017, but it was not yet complete at year’s end. To date, the city’s nearly 200,000 Muslim inhabitants worship in improvised mosques.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 4 / 4

There are no significant constraints on academic freedom in Greece, and the educational system is free of political indoctrination.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4 / 4

The government does not engage in improper monitoring of personal expression, and individuals are generally free to discuss their views in practice.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 12 / 12 (+1)

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4 (+1)

Freedom of assembly is guaranteed by the constitution, and the government generally protects this right. Austerity-related protests over the past decade have sometimes grown violent, and extremist groups like Golden Dawn have attempted to attack and intimidate assemblies in support of migrants’ rights or other causes they oppose. However, such instances have become less frequent since a crackdown on Golden Dawn’s leadership began in 2013, and police have improved their handling of security surrounding demonstrations.

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 due to a gradual improvement in people’s ability to participate in peaceful assemblies without the threat of violence from extremist groups like Golden Dawn.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 4 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) generally operate without interference from the authorities.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 4 / 4

Workers have the right to form and join unions, bargain collectively, and strike. The law provides protections against antiunion discrimination, and the government generally upholds union rights.

F. RULE OF LAW: 11 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4

The judiciary is largely independent, though its autonomy is undermined somewhat by corruption. Judges are appointed by the president on the advice of the Supreme Judicial Council, which is mostly composed of other judges. They serve until retirement age and cannot be removed arbitrarily.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 3 / 4

The law provides safeguards against arbitrary arrest and detention, ensures access to defense counsel, and provides for fair trial conditions. Persistent problems include court backlogs that lead to prolonged pretrial detention as well as improper detention of asylum seekers.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

While overall rates of violent crime are low, there are occasional acts of political violence. In May 2017, a mail bomb seriously injured former prime minister Lucas Papademos, whose tenure was associated with the harsh austerity policies imposed by Greece's creditors.

Some prisons and detention centers suffer from substandard conditions, and law enforcement personnel have at times been accused of physical abuse, particularly against vulnerable groups such as migrants and asylum seekers.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 2 / 4

Women generally enjoy equality before the law, though they continue to face workplace discrimination in practice.

Violence targeting immigrants, refugees, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people remains a problem. According to the Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN), the number of attacks has declined overall in recent years. This is due in large part to a law enforcement crackdown on Golden Dawn; a trial against dozens of the group's members and leaders was ongoing during 2017. The RVRN documented 102 cases of violence in 2017, including 34 attacks against migrants and refugees and 47 attacks against LGBT people. The Romany minority is also subject to discrimination despite legal protections.

Since 2016, when the EU reached an agreement with Turkey to curb the westward flow of migrants and refugees, the number entering Greece has been significantly reduced. However, over 60,000 remained stranded in Greece as of 2017, with many living in Reception and Identification Centers on the Aegean islands or in camps across Greece as Greek officials struggled to process asylum claims in a timely manner. Some of these sites feature harsh living conditions, violence, the harassment of women, and endangerment of children; under pressure from NGOs, officials have attempted to close the worst facilities and increase the use of urban accommodation. International observers have also questioned whether individuals who are deported to Turkey under the EU agreement are being returned to a safe third country.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 13 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

Freedom of movement is generally unrestricted.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 3 / 4

The government and legal framework are generally supportive of property rights and entrepreneurship, but bureaucratic obstacles can inhibit business activity. Those who have political connections or are willing to pay bribes can sometimes expedite official procedures.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

There are no major constraints on personal social freedoms, though domestic violence remains a problem. Members of the Muslim minority in Thrace can have their personal status matters adjudicated by muftis according to Sharia (Islamic law), which may put women at a disadvantage, but this community also has access to civil marriage and the courts.

In October 2017, the parliament passed legislation allowing unmarried transgender people over age 15 to change their gender on identity documents without undergoing gender reassignment surgery or other such procedures, subject to validation by a judge.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 4

Most residents enjoy legal protections against exploitative working conditions, but labor laws are not always adequately enforced. Migrants and asylum seekers are especially vulnerable to trafficking for forced labor or sexual exploitation, and government efforts to combat the problem, while increasing, remain insufficient, according to the U.S. State Department.

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