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Freedom in the World 2010 - Greece

Capital: Athens

Population: 11,277,000

Political Rights Score: 1 *

Civil Liberties Score: 2 *

Status: Free

Overview

In October 2009, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement returned to power, winning national elections and ending five years of rule by the center-right New Democracy party. The riots of late 2008 continued into early 2009 with the shooting of a police officer by the militant leftist group, Revolutionary Struggle, in January. In December, the country's debt reached critical levels, leading to social unrest.

The core of modern Greece gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1830. The ensuing century brought additional territorial gains at the Ottomans' expense, as well as domestic political struggles between royalists and republicans. Communist and royalist partisans mounted a strong resistance to Nazi German occupation during World War II, but national solidarity broke down in the early postwar period when royalists won national elections and eventually defeated the Communists in a civil war. In 1967, a group of army officers staged a military coup, suspending elections and arresting hundreds of political activists. A 1974 referendum rejected the restoration of the monarchy, and a new constitution in 1975 declared Greece a parliamentary republic.

The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) governed the country from 1981 to 2004, except for a brief period from 1990 to 1993, when the conservative New Democracy party held power. New Democracy returned to power in the 2004 elections and won another term in September 2007.

National elections were called in October 2009 by Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis half way through his four-year mandate, partly due to a number of corruption scandals that had rocked his coalition. PASOK returned to power in the October elections, winning 160 seats and ending five years of rule by Karamanlis's center-right New Democracy party, which captured only 91 seats. The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) took 21 seats, the Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) – a nationalist and xenophobic party – won 15, and the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) took 13. George Papandreou, the son and grandson of former prime ministers, was elected as the new prime minister.

The violent protests that erupted in December 2008 after the police shooting of a 15-year-old continued into early 2009. In January, a police officer was shot and seriously injured by the militant leftist group, Revolutionary Struggle, in an attack on riot police guarding the culture ministry in Athens; the group has also claimed responsibility for a 2007 attack on the U.S. embassy in Athens. The January attack was reminiscent of the domestic terrorism waged by the November 17 group for three decades until 2002. In June, another police officer guarding a witness's home was shot dead by two gunmen; the witness was involved in a trial related to another left-wing terrorist group, the Revolutionary People's Struggle.

The Greek police faced criticism in 2009 over the mistreatment of civilians, including the abuse of protesters during the December 2008 riots. The police have also been accused of using excessive force against detainees and denying suspects prompt access to lawyers, as well as allegations of arbitrary detention and torture.

A report released in February by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights raised concerns about the treatment of minorities in Greece, citing issues surrounding associational rights, statelessness of certain minorities, and the implementation of Sharia (Islamic law) by government-appointed Muftis in the region of Thrace.

In April, tens of thousands of people assembled to protest against the government's economic policies, which sought to address large deficits by freezing state wages and raising taxes. The protests were also focused on the government's bailout of large banks in the midst of the global recession.

In a September monitoring report, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) cited some improvements in the country's efforts to reduce racism, but noted considerable room for improvement, particularly related to the discrimination of minority groups, the recognition of persons belonging to the Macedonian community, and strengthening the ombudsman in charge of overseeing the law.

In October, eight Afghan migrants drowned when their boat crashed off the coast of the island of Lesbos. It is believed that the migrants were being smuggled as part of a human trafficking operation. In the first half of 2009, an estimated 14,000 migrants arrived in Greece by boat.

In December, Greece's debt reached over 400 billion dollars, its highest level in modern history, leading to considerable concern across Europe about its impact. Spending cuts announced that month aimed at restoring international confidence in the country's economy were met with public protests.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Greece is an electoral democracy. All 300 members of the unicameral Parliament are elected by proportional representation. The largely ceremonial president is elected by a supermajority of Parliament for a five-year term. The current president, Karolos Papoulias of PASOK, was elected unopposed in 2005. The prime minister is chosen by the president and is usually the leader of the majority party in Parliament.

The country has generally fair electoral laws, equal campaigning opportunities, and a system of compulsory voting that is weakly enforced. Some representatives of the Romany community complain that certain municipalities have failed to register Roma who did not fulfill basic residency requirements.

Corruption continues to be a problem, particularly within the police forces. During 2009, police officers were dismissed and suspended for taking bribes and other illegal activities, according to the U.S. State Department. The economic crisis further spotlighted the problem of corruption in the country; in December, the new prime minister, George Papandreou, held talks with opposition leaders and set out to create an anticorruption plan, including a reform of the tax system. In 2009, a former government

minister was accused of taking bribes for shipping contracts, though Parliament in May voted to not indict him; the incident contributed to the crisis of former prime minister Karamanlis, who eventually called for snap elections in October. Greece was ranked 71 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The constitution includes provisions for freedom of speech and the press, and citizens have access to a broad array of privately owned print and broadcast outlets. There are, however, some limits on speech that incites fear, violence, and public disharmony, as well as on publications that offend religious beliefs, are obscene, or advocate the violent overthrow of the political system. A 2007 media law mandates that the main transmission language of radio stations be Greek, and requires that radio stations keep a certain amount of money in reserve and hire a specific number of full-time staff, which places a disproportionate burden on smaller, minority-owned stations. While internet access is generally not restricted in Greece, officials blocked the Google search engine for privacy reasons in May and prohibited Google from taking pictures in Greece for the Google Maps' "street view" function. "Street view," which gives a 360-degree view of a street, has not been banned, but suspended until the government receives further requests for information.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution, though the Orthodox Church receives government subsidies and is considered the "prevailing" denomination of the country. Members of some minority religions face social discrimination and legal barriers, such as permit requirements to open houses of worship and restrictions on inheriting property. Proselytizing is prohibited, and consequently, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are routinely arrested and have reported abuse by police officers. Anti-Semitism also remains a problem. Athens is still awaiting the construction of the city's first licensed mosque. Academic freedom is not restricted in Greece.

Freedoms of assembly and association are guaranteed by the constitution and generally protected by the government, though there are some limits on groups representing ethnic minorities. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) generally operate without interference from the authorities, and some domestic human rights groups receive government funding and assistance. Workers have the right to join and form unions. In December 2008, an outspoken trade union leader was attacked by an unknown assailant who threw acid on her face. The leader was known to advocate for basic worker rights, often for immigrants in the cleaning industry.

The judiciary is independent, and the constitution provides for public trials. Human rights groups have raised concerns about the ill-treatment of asylum seekers by law enforcement officials, and prison overcrowding remains a problem.

Despite government efforts to combat it, racial intolerance is still pervasive in society and is often expressed by public figures. Laws against racism and incitement to hatred are rarely enforced. In March 2009, an appeals court overturned an earlier conviction against Kostas Plevris, a nationalist writer accused of publishing anti-Semitic material and inciting hatred in his book, *Jews, the Whole Truth*. The 2009 ECRI report noted that the leader of the far-right LAOS party, which won nearly 6 percent in October elections, frequently made public anti-Semitic and racist statements, including blaming immigrants for criminal activities; however, in March, the court overturned an earlier ruling against him of inciting hatred. The government does not officially recognize the existence of any non-Muslim ethnic minority groups, particularly Slavophones. Macedonian is not recognized as a language, and using the terms Turkos or Tourkikos ("Turk" and "Turkish," respectively) in the title of an association is illegal and may lead to the dissolution of the group. The Romany community continues to face considerable discrimination and a general denial of justice.

Immigrants are disproportionately affected by institutional problems in the judicial system. Bureaucratic delays force many into a semilegal status when they are not able to renew their documents, putting them in jeopardy of deportation. In 2009, the conservative government began cracking down on "clandestine" immigrants and

demolished a 13-year-old encampment housing approximately 1,800 immigrants in Patras. The new Socialist government has called for improvements in the country's treatment of immigrants, including stronger border control.

Women lack specific legislation to deal with domestic violence and face discrimination in the workplace. Women currently hold 17 percent of the seats in Parliament. Trafficking in women and children for prostitution remains a problem. While the government has attempted to address the issue in recent years, international NGOs continued to express concern over the country's inadequate punishment of trafficking offenders and the complicity of some officials in trafficking.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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