

Far From the Philosophies of Ancient Greece:
Modern Greek Transition to Democracy After the Fall of the Military Dictatorship

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Introduction to Comparative Politics GOVT130-002

7 November 2019

Ancient Greece has been long regarded as the birthplace of democracy and a flourishing center for philosophy which has given the modern world the seeds for further discussion about democratic ideals as well as their implementation. Many assume that Greece's ancient roots guide the modern nation's government institutions, however, the modern state of Greece is an incredibly young nation, younger even than the United States. The first King of modern Greece was installed in 1832 when Greece won its independence from the Ottoman Empire.¹ For years, the Greek state functioned as a monarchy yet since the collapse of a brief military dictatorship in 1974 has transitioned into a democracy.

For the purposes of this paper, democracy can be defined as it is in Samuel Huntington's book, *The Third Wave*, as a form of government in which the political power is won through the "competitive struggle" of the people's vote through free and fair elections which are regularly scheduled in which a vast majority of the adult population is eligible to vote. This definition of democracy also implies that citizens maintain certain civil rights such as the freedom of speech, protest, and politically organize to the extent which is required in order to engage in "political debate and the conduct of electoral campaigns".² In opposition, a totalitarian regime can be defined as Huntington as being a system of government with typically one person at the top levels of decision making who has a secret police force at his disposal and controls many of the means of communication as well as social and economic institutions. These systems also typically have a strong ideology or vision for the larger society which the leader imposes on the masses.³ Using these definitions of democracy and totalitarianism this paper will argue that

¹ "Greece Profile- Timeline", BBC, accessed November 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17373216>.

² Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave, democratization in the late twentieth century* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

³ Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave*, pp. 6-7.

during the period after the collapse of the military dictatorship, the Greek state made tremendous achievement toward full liberal democratization. This shift was caused by the political maturation of the Greek people, the availability of institutions, such as education to all citizens, and the Greek need for assistance from international bodies such as the European Union.

In the wake of the Greek Civil War, the government functioned in “triarchy” between the monarch, the parliament, and the military. This was interrupted however when, a month before new elections were scheduled, in April of 1967 several junior military officers launched a coup which plunged the country into a dictatorship for seven years. The dictatorship, known as *Troika*, organized by Georgios Papadopoulos, Nikolaos Makarezos, and Stylianos Pattakos, sought to defend the Greek civilization from Western secular influences.⁴ As the support of the political elites began to dry up, and a navy plot to overthrow the government was uncovered, the junta held elections in 1973. These elections however were “characterized by ballot manipulation and voter fraud.”⁴ This government eventually fell in large because of various student and university demonstrations. The most famous demonstration took place on November 17 in which the police drove a tank through the Polytechnic Institute of Athens and killed 23 students.⁵ In order to attempt to stabilize the nation, a meeting was held between the branches of government, and former political icons to establish a new government under Constantine Karamanlis.⁶

One of the main reasons for Greek democratization was the expansion of the availability of education throughout the country. In the 1960s, before the military coup, during the brief period under Center Union Party mandatory public education funded by the government was

⁴George Kaloudis, “Transitional Democratic Politics in Greece,” *International Journal on World Peace* 17, no. 1 (March 2000) 35-59. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20753241>.

⁵ Helena Smith, “Greece Scraps Law Banning Police From University Campuses,” *The Guardian*, August 8, 2019

⁶ Kaloudis, *Transitional Democratic Politics in Greece*, 45.

instituted⁵. According to Freedom House, and political scientist Daron Acemoglu, Education levels of a nation are heavily correlated with democracy, as education is seen to cultivate democratic ideals which can lead to political development.⁷ This change implemented by the CUP mandated that every Greek citizen of school age be enrolled in an educational institution. This policy removed one of the key powers which the elite held over the masses in Greece. For decades, the elite controlled the education system and the vast majority of poor Greek citizens didn't have the same access or even comparable access to education as these elites.⁸ In addition, during this time period, the government made the process for entrance into universities more objective which cut down on discrimination in higher education.⁹ These policies expanded education to groups whose prior access to it was limited, or inadequate.¹⁰ This time period was also characterized by a limitation of propaganda in school curriculum. In forming democracies, one of the earliest steps is empowering the people to govern themselves, as well as allowing access to information which does not stem from the government. In the case of Greece, the expansion of education allowed for a greater diversity of thought, as well as a greater economic diversity within Greek higher education institutions. When the junta eventually fell, a major contributor to that was the student activist community. The educational reforms which took place before the complete authoritarian turn of government provided citizens with the tools to political organization which eventually led to a desire for democracy and a government whose authority is granted from the governed.

⁷ Daron Acemoglu et. al., *From Education to Democracy?*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper no.11204, March 2005.

⁸ Myrsini Zorba, "Conceptualizing Creek Cultural Policy: the non-democratization of public culture," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15, no. 3 (August 2009): 245-259.

⁹ Zorba, "Conceptualizing Creek Cultural Policy," 248.

¹⁰ Zorba, "Conceptualizing Creek Cultural Policy," 248.

Much of the push toward reform and democratization is seen as a reaction to the harsh conditions suffered under the dictatorship. Director of the History and Government department at River College, George Kaloudis, believes that the fact that the military dictatorship could never legitimize itself as a government made support for democracy widespread among citizens.¹¹ The Greek people saw what could happen under authoritarianism and wanted to put in place democratic institutions to attempt to ensure that a backslide into authoritarianism would be difficult. One such institution was the exercise of limited government by President Karamanlis of the New Democracy party which took power after the fall of the junta. Instead of enforcing swift, harsh justice on the organizers of the coup which led to the military dictatorship, he took gradual steps to bring them to justice while maintaining public support and giving those sympathizing with the organizers less reason to oppose his government.¹²

Under the military dictatorship, the Greek Ministry of Culture was used as a means of cultural control by the military. They wanted to de-westernize Greek culture and restore it to the glory of ancient Greece. This Ministry of culture attacked the academics and those who supported democratic ideals as well as both Greek popular culture and the culture of the elite.¹³ When the dictatorship fell however the government of the New Democracy party understood the need to strengthen democratic ideals within the Greek population, and therefore although the Ministry of Culture had, under the junta, been used as a means of cultural control to establish a firm national identity. Following the collapse of the military dictatorship the new government

¹¹ Kaloudis, "Transitional Democratic Politics in Greece," 55.

¹² Kaloudis, "Transitional Democratic Politics in Greece," 55.

¹³ Zorba, "Conceptualizing Greek Cultural Policy," 249.

instructed the ministry to organize the national culture and promote cultural values associated with democracy.¹⁴

One of the key aspects of democracy, as included in Huntington's definition, is that those who acquire political power must do so through a "competitive struggle" for the support of the people.¹⁵ This spirit is exemplified in Greece though its long history of political patronage. Following the collapse of the junta, the notion of political patronage flourished in Greece. Politicians would offer certain benefits or "government rents" to specific groups which they knew to be responsive to these benefits in order to win elections¹⁶. While this does have some damaging effect by creating an environment suitable for populism, it also establishes a democratic relationship between the people and the government. The people have an expectation that the government will act in their best interests and exercise their ability to remove the government from office if it fails to do so. The tradition of political patronage has thus strengthened Greek democracy although it may open the door to possible corruption of individuals, it establishes the relationship between the government and the electorate which holds the government accountable to the electorate.

A major cause of Greek democratization is internationalism. All of western Europe supported Greece in its transition to democracy which aided the government's consolidation and legitimacy.¹⁷ As soon as he took office, much of President Karamanlis' agenda was focused on foreign policy. His major foreign policy goal was to get Greece into the European Community (now European Union) as a means to enmesh Greece into a community of democracy.¹⁸ One of

¹⁴ Zorba, "Conceptualizing Greek Cultural Policy," 249..

¹⁵ Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 6.

¹⁶ Takis S. Pappas, "Why Greece Failed," *Journal of Democracy* 24, No.2 (April 2013):31-45.

¹⁷ Kaloudis, "Transitional Democratic Politics in Greece," 54.

¹⁸ Kaloudis, "Transitional Democratic Politics in Greece," 50.

the criteria for being eligible for membership into the European Union, as outlined in the Copenhagen Criteria, are stable, democratic institutions of government.¹⁹ This was an incredible political move in terms of securing Greece's future as a democratic country as the nation would essentially be forced to remain a democracy in order to reap the economic benefits which are available to them through membership. This can be seen as recently as the 2008 financial crisis in which Greece was bailed out by the European Union. Without these organizations, the Greek state would have fallen into numerous depressions and financial institutions would have collapsed. Greece's financial dependence on the European Union and the Eurozone, while detrimental to the Greek economy, acts as a means of securing its democracy by keeping the nation committed to the progressive criteria which allow their membership to these organizations such as stable democratic institutions and protection of minority groups within the country.

The most recent Greek financial collapse and subsequent European Union bailouts are proof that its membership to the European Union acts as a democratic safeguard for Greece. The European Union imposed restrictions on the spending of the Greek government in order to force a government surplus with which to repay debt at the end of the financial year.²⁰ This most recent financial crisis has left Greece with a 25% blow to its GDP as well as around 20% unemployment.²¹ These numbers are incredibly high and show the extent of the damage on the Greek economy. Even so, the national response to this crisis and the harsh bailout restrictions and austerities which were imposed by the international community were not revolution or challenges to the governmental institutions; instead, they were elections. These elections, held in

¹⁹ "European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations," European Commission, Accessed 6 November, 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en.

²⁰ Marina Prentoulis, "Greece May Still be Europe's Sick Patient, but the EU is at Death's Door," *The Guardian*, August 21, 2018.

²¹ Prentoulis, "Greece May Still be Europe's Sick Patient."

July of 2019, resulted in the center-right party New Democracy winning a majority and forming a government under new Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.²² The solution which the Greek people choose to attempt to solve their economic unrest was a peaceful change of political power in an election in which the entire adult population of the country had the right to vote and over half the eligible population cast a ballot.

Where in 1967 the nation's problems resulted in a military coup which left Greece a brutal dictatorship, in 2019 they resulted in peaceful and democratic elections which shifted the political party in power. The results of these elections were respected by all parties. The differences between Greece in 1967 and modern Greece is the transition to democracy. Greek citizens today enjoy access to public education and freedom from discrimination in entering the nation's institutions of higher learning. They enjoy many civil liberties including the ability to form and actively participate within political parties as well as the freedom of expression and religion.²³ These being true, one obstacle which Greece currently faces is its refugee crisis. Thousands of refugees occupy camps in the Greek islands, outside Athens and in northern Greece with poor humanitarian conditions. These people remain in these camps as a result of a gridlock in the European Union which has the power to grant their asylum applications and move them into other European countries.²⁴ The stalemate of the refugee crisis in Greece, however, has largely to do with the inability of other European countries to agree on a collective solution for migration to other parts of Europe. It is not solely a reflection of the Greek state but rather an

²² Matina Stevis-Gridneff, "Greek Elections: Prime Minister Loses Re-Election to Center Right," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2019.

²³ "Freedom in the World 2019: Greece," Freedomhouse, Accessed November 6, 2019. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/greece>.

²⁴ Niki Kitsantonis, "Greek Refugee Camps Are Near Catastrophe, Rights Chief Warns", *The New York Times*, October 31, 2019.

issue of dependency on other member states. As long as Greece continues to have support from the European Union, there is no reason that the nation would backslide into authoritarianism or totalitarianism. While Greece does have systemic issues within its government, as evidenced by its financial crisis, it has made the transition to democracy and now its government functions as a democratic regime.

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