7 Democracy Building and Political Parties

Setting up a democracy is one thing, making it work is quite another. This study began with postwar politics in Greece, when the political parties had no autonomy and were almost entirely dependent on a partisan state. Then it passed to the initially uncertain establishment of the modern democratic regime and traced its trajectory mainly through the development of ND, the largest and most important party during the early post-authoritarian phase. Today, democracy in the Third Greek Republic appears to be firmly established and, by all objective standards, is operating at full stretch. However, as more recent experience has made grievously evident, it is still far from perfect. In the years following the formative 1974–81 period this book has examined, the parties grew huge and omnipresent, and their performance was often accompanied by irresponsibility, inefficiency, mismanagement, political corruption and economic scandal. Social polarization, in particular, became acute. We must therefore ask: what has gone awry with the young Greek democracy? The matter is not negligible inasmuch as it directly affects the quality of the existing democratic regime, let alone its future viability.

Where do we stand then? Unless we are ready to profess that parties and party systems do not really matter, we obviously have to backtrack and examine the various issues from the beginning. My main concern here will be with the performance and quality of the modern Greek democracy. However, there can be no value assessment of the regime without a prior and thorough evaluation of its main constituent parts, the political parties themselves. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to examining the role of the political parties in the overall development and working of the contemporary Greek democracy. Let me make it clear from the very beginning: my reason for this examination is not merely that the existence of parties and party competition are commonly considered the crux of liberal democracy. Nor do I uncritically take it for granted that ‘a strong system of political parties is essential for a strong democracy’.
As is so often the case, especially in transitional or newly institutionalized political systems, the reality is far more complicated than politicians think, and far less neat than political scientists would like it to be. Parties are important, of course. They can greatly improve or, conversely, seriously impair the quality of democracies. I shall try, therefore, to assess the role parties have played in Greek democracy and how they affect its workings.

In the light of the foregoing, and in what will necessarily be a revisionist interpretation of Greek parties and party politics, I propose to view my subject from three different vantage points, each corresponding to a chapter section. In an internal context, my analysis will focus on the political parties as individual units and examine their attributes and relations to each another. In the median context I shall explore the party system universe and how it relates to society. In the external context, my preoccupation will be with the political system as a whole, in order to see how parties relate to the state. Each of these sections will address and try to answer a specific question. In section order, these questions are:

1. What really distinguishes the principal political parties in Greece from one another?
2. How are party politics related to society, and what exactly determines the voters’ decisions?
3. Which changes in the overall regime performance were due to the new role of the parties?

Satisfactory answers to these questions will hopefully leave us better equipped to confront, in a final section, the issue of democratic governability, and to assess the quality of the Greek democracy’s performance.

THE INNER CONTEXT: INTER–PARTY RELATIONS

Greece’s parliamentary democracy has all too often been interrupted by coups, countercoups, revolutions, social uprisings, and general unrest. For the most part it was monarchical, but sported republican intervals. Lacking stability, institutionalization, and durability, Greek parliamentarism has been not only