Constitutional changes without constitutional revision

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The last thing that Greece currently needs is the start of the process for the revision of the Constitution. At a very critical moment for the country's economy, with the state's existence being under threat and with the political system collapsing and becoming more and more unreliable, any discussion over constitutional revision is, according to my opinion, untimely, absurd, pointless and misleading. Such a kind of constitutional change will neither respond to any of the immediate and profound problems that have been brought about by the crisis, nor tackle the chronic and structural ills of Greek political life: political and administrative corruption, tax evasion, paralysis of the state and the administration, wrecking of education, party corruption and clientelism.

The Constitution was not the one responsible for scandals and corruption or for public deficits and the excessive public debt. Besides, you do not need constitutional amendment in order to quell bureaucracy and tax evasion, to speed up the operation of the judicial system, and to acquire a flexible and effective public administration that will be respected by citizens and companies alike. Let us not use the Constitution and its revision as an alibi for political power to conceal its inability to tackle a political problem on political terms. And it is sad to see constitutional changes being used as a firework.

This is the first reason why I am cautious vis-à-vis all calls for any kind of constitutional amendment.

However, there is also a second reason. Constitutional revision is a time-consuming process. It requires increased parliamentary majorities. It takes time - at least two years - to be realized. Thus, it is about the future, not the present. And the most important aspect of all is that it needs respective decisions by two Parliamentary Terms. In the current, profoundly polarizing political atmosphere that we have been experiencing throughout the crisis, such a climate of consensus is nowhere to be seen.

Nevertheless, it is true that the issue of constitutional changes makes a constant appearance in the political agenda. In fact, the new leader of the opposition, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, revived this discussion in his very first public statement after his election as leader of Nea Dimokratia: According to him, constitutional revision was to be the only issue that could become a fertile ground for common understanding with Syriza.

If indeed there is a prospect for national understanding and political consensus - which we all desire and should all seek - on issues pertaining to the function of the political system and, especially, to the rules of the political and electoral game, then I believe that certain important institutional changes can be agreed on immediately, here and now, by the current Parliament, with a simple law, without the process of constitutional revision. These are changes that are indeed of a constitutional character but concern the substantial and not the formal Constitution.

There are four such changes: Firstly, the total number of MPs can be reduced from 300 to 200 or 240 with a simple law, as explicitly provided by article 51 of the Constitution, and this change can be instituted immediately by the Parliament. The change entails a reduction of parliamentary seats by 1/3 in the respective electoral districts, and their partial redistribution.

Secondly, such a measure must be combined with the legislation - in accordance with the article 81, paragraph 4 of the Constitution - of the incompatibility of the function of the minister with that of the MP. Any MP who will be appointed as minister will have to resign from his/her parliamentary post and will not be able to exercise his/her parliamentary tasks. MPs are elected in order to represent the nation and legislate together with the government, and not in order to rule while having constantly in their minds how to serve their electoral clientele to secure their reelection.

Thirdly, there must be a split of the large electoral districts. Those with many seats must be broken down into smaller ones, so that excessive electoral spending and illicit transactions with the media are reduced.

Fourthly, it is necessary to cut drastically the scandalous 50-seat bonus given to the first party and to abolish or modify the voting by cross system. The latter should be replaced by an alternative way of expressing the electoral preferences of the voters. Several notable proposals have been put forward on that matter, which could become the subject of national understanding.

All of these structural reforms have one central goal: to crack down on party corruption, clientelism, and the dependence of MPs and ministers on political favors for electioneering. These changes seek to strike a severe blow to the 'woodworm' that has been eating into the political system, altering the essence of our representative democracy.
The formal revision of the Constitution follows.