

PM claims the center

On the opening day of ruling New Democracy's sixth congress yesterday, Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis sought to place his party firmly in the political center by emphasizing the virtues of consensus and solidarity. The opening of the party congress was timed to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the return of democracy to Greece. It was Karamanlis's uncle, Constantine Karamanlis, who returned to Greece in the early hours of July 24 to take over power vacated by a disgraced dictatorship. Fittingly, former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who had given the elder Karamanlis his presidential plane to fly to Greece on, was the guest of honor at the Congress, along with Wilfried Martens, president of the European People's Party. On returning to power, the elder Karamanlis founded New Democracy as a progressive, centrist party, rather than continuing with the pre-junta National Radical Union with its hard-right image. The current prime minister appeared yesterday as the inheritor of the late founder's policies and strong pro-European positions. He said the four main features of his government were social and national consensus; a social conscience and support for the underprivileged; politics with a human face; and humble governance, without a trace of arrogance. Karamanlis also emphasized that he would not let his party become identified with the State and that his pre-election promises would all be fulfilled. «This is a government of all Greeks,» he said, adding that the old left-right rivalry was obsolete. Elected as New Democracy's sixth leader in 1997, on the merit of having the same name as his illustrious uncle, Costas Karamanlis has become the party's unchallenged leader; the one potential rival, Athens Mayor Dora Bakoyannis, chose to emphasize her role at the helm of the Olympics host city and declared her total loyalty. Fresh from two recent election victories, Karamanlis expects the congress to be little more than another consecration ceremony. The congress continues today with more speeches by party officials; tomorrow, the delegates will vote for 150 of the party's 500 Central Committee members. The rest are ex-officio appointees.