

The Political Evolution of Northern Cyprus and its Effect on Turkish-Cypriot Relations with Turkey

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Abstract

While ethnic kinship and perceived commonality of interests have ensured close relations between Turkish Cypriots and Turkey, the political ties between them have changed significantly over time. From a community that once dutifully followed Turkey's lead in all matters of political significance – their relationship with Turkey being essentially one of client and patron – Turkish Cypriots have evolved into a community with a distinct political identity, its own democratic institutions, a well-developed sense of its own interests, and leaders who represent and articulate a Turkish-Cypriot point of view. Though heavily reliant on Turkish financial assistance and other forms of government-to-government support, those leaders nevertheless display considerable confidence regarding their capacity to manage their own affairs. In consequence, Turkish-Cypriot relations with Turkey have grown progressively more complex and nuanced, and in certain respects more distant.

Keywords: Northern Cyprus, TRNC, Turkish Cypriots, Turkey, identity, democratic consolidation, political parties, elections

Introduction

Our aims in this paper are, first, to trace the evolution of Turkish-Cypriot political institutions and processes since the collapse of bi-communal government with particular attention to the growth of democracy, drawing briefly on the theoretical literature on democratic consolidation, and second, to show how this evolution has affected relations between Turkish Cypriots and Turkey.

Unpromising Beginnings

Until the mid-twentieth century Turkish-Cypriot political activity remained essentially pre-democratic, with political leadership exercised by a small class of notables whose authority to speak on behalf of the community was rarely contested. It was not until the 1940s and 50s that organised political parties appeared. These parties, however, were basically reactive and defensive, driven less by the pull of democratic ideas than by the push of threatening circumstances. The first such parties – KATAK (Association of the Turkish Minority in the Island of Cyprus), formed in 1942, and KTP (Cyprus is Turkish Party), formed in 1955 – were ethnically-based umbrella parties

whose commitment to democracy was instrumental and secondary. Their main purpose was to rally popular support for a unified Turkish-Cypriot position.¹

In the late 1950s, however, as communal conflict escalated, parties of the KATAK or KTP type began to seem ineffectual, resulting in a shift of Turkish-Cypriot support towards more militant organisations that combined political representation with the promotion of Turkish nationalism and the sponsorship of armed militias. Foremost among the latter was TMT (Turkish Defence Organisation), formed in 1958 with covert aid from Turkey. Militarily, its aim was to counter EOKA; politically, its aim was to counter the Greek-Cypriot demand for *enosis* with an equally inflammatory demand of its own: for *taksim*, or partition. The internationally imposed solution to these incompatible goals was independence accompanied by a system of democratic bi-communal government, which soon collapsed. By the end of 1963 communal conflict had resumed, this time on a scale surpassing any that had previously been experienced. For the Turkish-Cypriot minority, the consequences were catastrophic: they managed to hold on to a few scattered pieces of territory, which prevented their total defeat, but the dislocation suffered by the civilian population who had relocated to these enclaves was severe (Bahcheli, 1990, pp. 60-70).

The Emergence of Party Politics

The Turkish Cypriots organised a makeshift civil administration in the enclaves and in addition an armed military force, led by officers from Turkey, assumed responsibility for defence and exercised considerable general authority (Patrick, 1976, p. 84). At first the need to maintain communal solidarity was imperative, but life in the enclaves was meagre and full of hardship for most residents, their complaints multiplied, and the argument that their security required a united front began to seem unconvincing. The first sign that political divisions of a traditional ideological kind were re-emerging was the founding of the opposition Republican Turkish Party (CTP) in 1970. The CTP was a party of the left that espoused views similar to those of Greek-Cypriot Communist Party (AKEL). However, it was not until after the momentous events of 1974 and the partition of Cyprus that Turkish-Cypriot political parties began to proliferate, offering voters for the first time a variety of political choices. A constituent assembly elected to draft a new constitution for northern Cyprus included critics of the existing administration whose influence in shaping the new 'Turkish Federated State of Cyprus' was considerable. A second opposition party, the Populist Party, which espoused a moderate, social democratic agenda, emerged in August 1975. It was soon followed by a new governing party of the right, the National Unity Party (UBP), led by the President, Rauf Denktaş. While generally right of centre on questions of social and

1 The roles of KAYTAK and KTP were circumscribed by the general lack of a democratic environment under British colonial administration and specifically by the suspension of democratic elections between 1931 and 1943 because of the Greek-Cypriot revolt. Both organisations advocated greater democratisation of the political system, without notable effect.

economic policy, the UBP above all espoused a nationalist agenda and close relations with Turkey. In the following year the Populists split, with a breakaway faction forming yet another left-of-centre party, the Communal Liberation Party (TKP). In an increasingly crowded field, the TKP positioned itself somewhat to the right of the CTP on social and economic issues (Dodd, 1993, p. 109).

In the 1976 elections, the first after the division of the island, Denktash and his UBP scored easy victories. But in 1981, a reinvigorated left opposition succeeded in humbling both Denktash and the UBP (*ibid.*, p. 120). Denktash barely managed to hold on to the presidency, while the UBP clung to office by forming a weak coalition government with two splinter parties. This was the first coalition; and ever since coalitions have been a regular feature of Turkish-Cypriot politics.

The gains made by the parties of the left in 1981 were made by exploiting economic and social issues, where the UBP was vulnerable. The main strengths of the UBP resided in its leadership, above all in the person of Denktash, who remained a widely revered figure despite the decline in his electoral support, and in its virtual 'ownership' of the national question. On that question, it was the leftist parties that were vulnerable, particularly the CTP, and to a lesser degree, the TKP. The charge that was regularly levelled at them by their opponents was that they were insufficiently patriotic, or even – the worst insult of all – 'pro-Greek'. It is no wonder, therefore, that the national question was not their preferred field when it came to fighting elections. And it is equally no wonder that it was exactly the field where Denktash and the UBP preferred to fight.

The TRNC and the Development of the Party System

The declaration of the TRNC² may be variously understood. Ostensibly, it was a move designed to strengthen the Turkish-Cypriot case in the international arena, following a series of setbacks,³ by asserting the Turkish Cypriots' right to self-determination and their own separate state. In effect, the Turkish Cypriots were claiming an international status equal to that of the Greek Cypriots – a point not lost on the south, where it provoked an immediate and furious response. But the declaration could also be understood as a move on the chessboard of Turkish-Cypriot internal politics and its timing placed in the context of the delicate left-right party balance after 1981, which it had the potential to disrupt.

Those on the far left of the ideological spectrum rejected the whole idea of independence out of hand as a right-wing nationalist trick designed to prevent the 'working classes' (Turkish-Cypriot

2 Although the northern part of the island is referred to as TRNC in this essay, it is acknowledged that the TRNC is not recognised by the international community except Turkey (editor's note).

3 In particular, resolutions were passed in international forums that Turkish Cypriots (and Turkey) viewed as threatening, such as United Nations Resolution 37/253.

and Greek-Cypriot) from uniting. One young leftist at the time – Mehmet Ali Talat – later revealed that he had wept when the TRNC was declared (Güven, 2009, p. 131).⁴ Others took a less extreme view but were naturally suspicious that Denktaş – who was the driving force behind the declaration – would use it to revive his and the UBP's sagging electoral fortunes. For if he succeeded in once again moving the national question to the forefront of politics, this would likely undercut the left's appeal to the electorate on mundane bread-and-butter issues. They were also alarmed by the possibility that in the process of writing a new constitution Denktaş would try to secure additional powers for the presidency. Ultimately, the latter fear proved groundless: the combined weight of the opposition parties was sufficient to block major changes and in the end Denktaş and the UBP had to be content with a document that was little changed from the one it replaced. The main institutional change was to increase the number of seats in the legislature from 40 to 50. In a referendum held on 5 May 1985, 70.2% of the electorate voted in favour of the new constitution (Dodd, 1993, p. 131).

In the following presidential and parliamentary elections, which were held on separate dates in June, Denktaş's revived reputation as the guardian of Turkish-Cypriot rights ensured his election as president by a wide margin: in an election which saw a remarkable turnout of 85.7%, he received 70.2% of the vote while his nearest rival won only 18.3%. Denktaş thus regained nearly all of the support he had lost in 1981. Yet his party, the UBP, failed to make a similar recovery. While it finished well ahead of the CTP and TKP, it won only 24 of 50 seats, forcing the formation of another coalition government. The opposition as a whole, however, was more fragmented than ever and the need for a coalition ended abruptly when the UBP increased its number of seats to a majority owing to defections from other parties (*ibid.*, pp. 131-133).⁵

In later elections it became evident that the existence of the TRNC did in fact affect the Turkish-Cypriot political dynamic in ways that the left opposition had feared: it did reinvigorate the national question and it did revive Denktaş's electoral fortunes. It also stopped the erosion of UBP support and took away the momentum of the left-of-centre parties, though this was not altogether clear in 1985. Since then, however, although the UBP has at times been forced to form coalitions with smaller partners, and has tasted electoral defeat, it has remained overall the most formidable party in the TRNC and the only party (thus far) able to form single-party governments. Its greatest asset is its large and generally solid base of nationalistically inclined centre-right voters, which it assiduously cultivates. Its ideological appeal, moreover, is bolstered by able leadership, efficient organisation, effective advertising and messaging, a strong list of candidates, and not least, its use of patronage to reward party service. Of all the Turkish-Cypriot

4 In the end the left-wing parties reluctantly voted in favour of the proclamation, including the CTP, the party Talat supported and eventually came to lead.

5 The appearance of a new party, Yeni Doğuş Partisi (New Birth Party), which found a constituency among settlers, contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition. In 1993 the YDP merged with the Democratic Party.

parties, it is the one that most resembles the 'electoral-professional party' (Panebianco, 1988, p. 264).

By 2005, however, there were signs of a possible realignment of partisan allegiances. Between 1993 and 2005 the UBP and CTP had alternated in office in a series of coalition governments, with one issue – the UN-sponsored Annan Plan for reunification – dominating the political agenda and putting the UBP, as the main anti-Annan party, on the wrong side of public opinion. In 2003 the CTP won more seats than the UBP but its gains were inadequate to form a stable coalition government, thus necessitating another round of elections in 2005.⁶ These elections – which followed the 2004 referendum in which Turkish Cypriots had resoundingly endorsed the CTP stance on the Annan plan – were crucial for the UBP (which was in opposition at the time) and potentially disastrous. In the event, the UBP managed to hold its ground, winning 19 seats. But it was no match for the CTP-led coalition government, which won 30 seats (CTP 24, Democratic Party 6) and thus a clear majority. The CTP benefited from being in office during a time when the TRNC economy was enjoying a period of exceptional growth, but it benefited most of all from a carry-over effect from the referendum. It also ran an effective campaign, downplaying its left-wing programme and emphasising instead its reputation as the pro-EU party, which contained an implied promise of future prosperity, and the international acclaim accorded its leader, Mehmet Ali Talat, who was prominently pictured in campaign ads in the company of high EU officials and other world leaders (Sozen, 2005, pp. 468-471).

The carry-over effect gave the CTP an opportunity to make permanent the realignment in the party system that appeared to be taking place. But, for a number of reasons, it signally failed to do so. The favourable treatment that the EU had promised (and the CTP had prematurely anticipated) turned out to be illusory, inflationary public sector wage increases were widely resented, the economy turned sour and, under growing pressure, the coalition disintegrated. In the parliamentary elections of April 2009, the voters who had drifted away from the UBP returned en masse to their former allegiance, giving the party an absolute majority of 26 seats, on 44.1% of the vote. The CTP fell back to its more customary level, with 15 seats on 29.2% (Sozen, 2009, p. 346). Hence, viewed from the perspective of a widely used typology of elections, the 2003 and 2005 elections turned out to be 'deviant' rather than 'realigning' (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). The year 2009 saw the UBP restored to its place of pre-eminence in the party system and once again able to form a single-party government.

Apart from CTP policy missteps and economic problems, one of the factors that contributed to the UBP victory was that it had made use of its period in opposition to moderate its position on the national question, which had been a major handicap in the two previous elections. This in turn led to its adopting a new rhetoric of moderation that was strikingly reflected in the design of

6 In 2003 the CTP expanded its name to 'Turkish Republican Party–United Forces' (CTP-BG) in a bid to attract voters who traditionally supported centre-right parties. For consistency, we use 'CTP' throughout.

its 2009 election campaign. The UBP remained proudly nationalist – projecting an image of itself as the party that had declared the TRNC and stood for ‘national unity’ (its election slogan) – but gone was the intransigent rhetoric that had put it out of step with the mainstream of Turkish-Cypriot opinion. Where previously it had stood for ‘no’ to the Annan plan, ‘no’ to federation, and ‘no’ to anything except separate statehood, now it campaigned as the party that responsibly supported the ongoing negotiations to find a solution, as long as Turkish-Cypriot interests were adequately safeguarded. For the UBP, this also had the happy result of aligning its position more closely with that of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey (Sozen, 2009, p. 349).

Democratic Consolidation

In retrospect, it can be seen that neither the hoped-for external gains from the TRNC’s creation, nor the dire consequences that opponents feared, actually materialised. Yet it did have important unanticipated consequences. Notwithstanding some setbacks and some persistent shortcomings, the general course of Turkish-Cypriot political development after the coming of the TRNC has been towards the consolidation of democratic principles and practices and a generally enhanced quality of civic life. These, of course, are concepts that require further elaboration. Following the conceptualisations of Juan Linz and Alfred C. Stepan (1996), we define the path of development under the TRNC as one of ‘consolidation’ rather than a ‘transition’ to democracy (such as took place in Eastern Europe, for example), because the shift that took place was not from a prior undemocratic regime to a democratic one, but rather a process of building on pre-existing foundations.

According to Linz and Stepan, consolidation takes place when three ‘layers’ of change – behavioural, attitudinal, and constitutional – combine and interact to make democracy ‘the only game in town’. Genuinely competitive elections are central to the process of consolidation. But consolidation depends also on the growth and entrenchment of other factors, including a well-developed civil society, ‘autonomous and valued’ political bodies, such as parliaments and parties, the rule of law, an ‘institutionalized economic society’, and a bureaucracy capable of providing needed state services (Linz and Stepan, 1996, pp. 5-15). Democracies vary considerably in the way they mix these factors, and no democracy may be said to perfectly exemplify all of them, but they are nevertheless useful criteria of evaluation.

Any application of these criteria to the TRNC must begin with the question of whether democracy is ‘the only game in town’, since that is fundamental. The TRNC record over the past quarter-century strongly suggests that it is. The political behaviour of Turkish Cypriots exhibits a degree of attachment to democracy that is similar to that found in other well-established democracies. Voter turnout in TRNC elections is high by international standards, as is the rate of citizen participation in political parties (Siaroff, 2000, p. 25). Elections are vigorously contested, with no major barriers to new entrants, as the number and variety of minor parties indicates.

Election outcomes are close and typically produce both an effective government (often a coalition) and an effective parliamentary opposition, with a lawful and orderly change of governing party (or parties) if necessary. The details of election rules may at times be hotly disputed since in closely contested elections even the smallest change in the rules can be consequential, but the overriding requirement is that elections must be free and fair. Turkish Cypriots have absorbed those norms into their political culture. Though problems of inefficiency and corruption persist, these have come under increasing critical scrutiny by opposition members and the media and appear to be in decline. On the whole, when it comes to delivering services to its citizens, the governmental performance of the TRNC is rather plodding and unremarkable – much like other small democracies.⁷

Identity Politics and Relations with Turkey

Turkish Cypriots feel the tug of ethnic kinship with mainland Turks, with whom they share bonds of language, culture and religion, and few would deny their debt to Turkey for defending them during past communal conflicts and supporting them afterwards. Their gratitude is deep and genuine, and the events that inspire it are faithfully commemorated. But at the same time they do not for the most part see themselves as singular or ‘unhyphenated’ Turks, indistinguishable from their mainland kin (Ramm, 2006, pp. 528-531; Lacher and Kaymak, 2005, pp. 159-160). Their cultural identity inescapably reflects the complex reality of Cyprus. And that reality, in the twenty-first century, has resulted in perceptual and attitudinal shifts that have reshaped their relations with Turkey. Two key historical events made these shifts possible and perhaps inevitable. The first was the 1974 division, as a result of which Turkish Cypriots became physically concentrated in one area and hence better able to preserve their identity and culture and govern themselves. And as their institutions of self-government expanded and developed so too did their confidence, their faith in their own leaders, and their sense of distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* mainland Turkey. The second was the creation of the TRNC which, by proclaiming their separate statehood, provided them with both a powerful incentive and new state instruments for democratic development, identity formation and the articulation of their national interests.

These changes, it must be emphasised, were unintended. As originally envisioned, the TRNC was meant to strengthen the *Turkish* identity of Turkish Cypriots (thus implicitly foreclosing

7 The treatment of non-citizen ethnic and religious minorities is also a measure of democracy. According to the UN Secretary General's report on the United Nations peace operation in Cyprus dated 28 May, 2010, there are 361 Greek Cypriots and 128 Maronites (UN Security Council, 2010, p. 3), living in isolated villages in the Karpas peninsula and Kormatiki respectively, who face numerous restrictions on the education of their children, the use of their land and properties, and access to the courts (Constantinou, 2008, pp. 158-159). The decision of the TRNC government to allow unrestricted travel across the Green Line in 2003 eased the isolation of these communities but their overall treatment represents a weak point in Turkish-Cypriot democracy.

further processes of identity formation), and promote closer ties to Turkey. Denktash and the UBP thus made the promotion of a common Turkish nationalism and national identity a high state priority.⁸ However, their efforts were very largely in vain, for the contradiction between asserting a distinctive Turkish-Cypriot statehood while at the same time promoting a singular Turkish nationalism was impossible to reconcile. And it was equally impossible to keep the identity question out of partisan politics. The party lines were soon clearly drawn: the UBP became the standard bearer of Turkish nationalism and a 'Turks in Cyprus' identity while the CTP became the main standard bearer of Turkish-Cypriot nationalism and a unique Turkish-Cypriot identity. Their alternation of office naturally caused some confusion, but over time and under pressure of events the parties' outlooks have tended to converge – though important differences remain. The differences are perhaps most evident in their respective approaches to the Turkish settler question. The UBP takes the view that Turks who settle legally in the TRNC are assets to Turkish-Cypriot society who should be welcomed, treated equally and fairly, and protected against discrimination. It is the party of full, unqualified integration and this has earned it a large base of electoral support among the settlers (Hatay, 2005, pp. 23-47). The CTP and other left-of-centre parties generally take a more negative view, seeing the settlers as an obstacle to reunification and a source of social problems. Though not against integration, one of their concerns is to impose tighter restrictions on the entry of new migrants.

Lack of space precludes a discussion of the many ramifications of the settler question. In our view, the balance of evidence suggests that Turkish Cypriots – while by no means unanimous, on this as on other issues – have for the most part pragmatically made the necessary social accommodations and have been able absorb a large influx of settlers with relative ease. This is not to say that there have been no problems, but compared to those experienced by many European countries when faced with much smaller numbers of immigrants relative to their population, the problems have been manageable. One of the reasons for this is that Turkish Cypriots have grown accustomed to having an inclusive, 'permeable' and layered identity – linguistically Turkish, culturally Turkish-Cypriot or 'island Turkish' and, among the young (somewhat ironically) 'European' (Ramm, 2006, pp. 537-539).

Politically, relations with Turkey were long complicated by the UBP-CTP cleavage in the TRNC. Governments in Ankara – almost invariably right-wing, nationalistic, and inclined to view Cyprus as a 'security matter' – were strongly supportive of Denktash and the UBP, whose views they shared, and equally strongly biased against the CTP, whose leftist policies they disliked and whose pro-unification stance they distrusted. The CTP, therefore, had every reason when in power to stress the point that Turkish-Cypriot interests were not the same as Turkey's and to defend their aim to build better relations with Greek Cypriots, with the eventual goal of

8 For example, pictures and statues of Atatürk proliferated in public places and many streets were renamed in honour of Turkish heroes.

reunification. The CTP's dilemma was that it could not go very far in asserting a distinct Turkish-Cypriot national interest without provoking criticism that it was jeopardising Turkish financial support. But in 2002 that concern was suddenly removed by the election in Turkey of the AKP government. Avid for EU membership, and wishing to remove the Cyprus issue as an obstacle, the AKP found the CTP position on reunification much to its liking. It therefore signalled its support for CTP leader Talat, who as prime minister led the Turkish-Cypriot side in negotiations leading up to the Annan plan. It also gave the plan its endorsement, which helped the CTP-led yes side to win the 2004 referendum (Bahcheli and Noel, 2009, pp. 244-247). But since then Turkish-Cypriot and Turkish politics have gone their separate ways. Alignment with the AKP failed to help the CTP in the 2009 elections, which were won by the UBP, with the AKP playing no role. Beset by problems closer to home, and with its EU aspirations fading, the AKP government continues to support the TRNC financially but shows little interest in its domestic affairs.

Conclusion

Within the constitutional framework of the TRNC there has developed a competitive multi-party system in which two main parties (UBP and CTP, one centre-right, one centre-left) tower over the rest. No government can be formed without the participation of one or other of them. On the whole, this pattern of electoral politics resembles the pattern found in many other democracies. The major difference is that the normal pattern of party competition in the TRNC is prone to give way to plebiscitary voting when the one overriding issue is the recurring national question – but even in that respect the TRNC is by no means unique, as citizens in places such as Catalonia or Scotland or Quebec might readily attest.

Identity formation is always a complex process and, for the Turkish Cypriots, the process has taken them far from the simplistic official formulations of the early TRNC era and towards a more plural, outward-looking and culturally inclusive national consciousness.

This change developed symbiotically with other changes, the most important of which was the creation of the TRNC, which set in motion developments in the party system, in the institutions of government, and broadly in the political culture. Taken together, these developments constitute a sustained process of democratic consolidation.

The effects of this on TRNC-Turkish relations have been significant. At the popular level, while the bonds of language and culture remain strong, politically Turkish Cypriots have grown accustomed to their own way of practicing democracy, which is different from the Turkish way. Quite apart from the huge disparity in scale between the two systems, there are institutional and behavioural differences that are fundamental. The respective party systems, for example, have few if any parallels and the issues that stir Turkish voters (such as the 'headscarf' issue) have practically no resonance in the TRNC. Its parties and voters prefer instead to focus on their own affairs – however parochial these may seem from a Turkish perspective. Moreover, since the 2004 referendum on the Annan plan, the perennial national question has come to be seen by Turkish

Cypriots as primarily a matter of Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot economic and political relations that can only be settled in Cyprus – where their interests are democratically represented by the TRNC. Once one referendum has been held, for all practical purposes it becomes impossible to proceed to a settlement without another. That leaves the EU and Turkey still prominently in the larger picture, but with neither the desire nor the capacity to impose their wishes.

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