

Cyprus: The Way Forward

Nicos A Pittas

In the turmoil of an election campaign, it is hard for politicians as a class to avoid taking 'shots' at each other and engaging in the classic confrontations to which politicians are prone by their vocation. It is really too much to expect them to draw back from the cut and thrust of electoral politics, and to sacrifice potential advantage (or, what virtually amounts to the same thing, avert political damage) in the interest of the common good. And yet, that is what Cyprus really needs as we and the international community contemplate what may mature into another UN backed initiative to solve the long standing Cyprus problem, and bring about the reunification of our estranged Greek and Turkish communities.

Undoubtedly, the majority of Greek Cypriots felt they got the short end of the stick in the last initiative that resulted in their rejecting the version of the so-called Annan Plan put to them in the referendum two years ago now. On the other hand, our Turkish Cypriot compatriots saw the Plan as an acceptable comprehensive solution and supported it almost as overwhelmingly as we rejected it. One suspects, in a rather ironic way both their support and our opposition was based on the same factor: Cyprus's membership in the European Union.

For our community, EU membership clearly goes a long way to equalise the negotiating strength between us and the Turkish side. Accordingly, many Greek Cypriots must have felt that we could get a better deal as a full EU member than what was on offer after the negotiating debacle at Bürgenstock and the Secretary-general's arbitrated final version of the Plan submitted to the people in the referenda. For the Turkish community, on the other hand, the solution to the problem that for nearly thirty years had eluded us because of the intransigence of their leadership, and the policy of successive Turkish governments since 1974, offered the prospect of access to the benefits that EU membership would have brought to their community. One long isolated by the international community that refuses to recognise their unilaterally declared entity that relies almost entirely on Turkey for its economic sustenance and the Turkish army for its security and forced separation from the rest of the Island.

In essence, we saw the solution being offered as the product of a weak negotiating position that would soon be strengthened by EU membership, whereas the other side saw it as an acceptable compromise necessary to share in the benefits of membership.

But that is all water under the bridge now, or “history” as the Greek foreign minister Dora Bakoyianni recently described the Annan Plan. The international community seems ready to move forward and seek out new approaches for bringing about the desired rapprochement between the two sides. This was clearly the upshot of the joint communiqué recently agreed to between President Tassos Papadopoulos and the UN Secretary-general after their meeting in Paris. Recent statements out of Washington similarly seem to recognise the negative emotional reaction that the Greek Cypriot community has to the Annan Plan that was effectively anathematised for better or for worse by the ‘no’ camp in the referendum campaign.

What we must not lose sight of, however, is that if we want to maintain the aegis of the UN for any initiative to bridge the differences between the two sides, we cannot assume that our strengthened negotiating position since joining the EU entirely changes the negotiating context or makes possible a solution that will be radically different from earlier UN backed proposals. At the end of the day, the UN has to operate within the parameters of the relevant Security Council resolutions that make it clear that any solution has to be acceptable to both sides, as well as the High Level Agreements of 1977 and 1979 that prescribe a solution that is federal, bi-communal and bi-zonal. This effectively rules out any settlement on the constitutional aspect of the problem that is based on the 1960 unitary state constitution.

It also rules out a solution that would allow all Greek Cypriots displaced by the invasion and occupation of 1974 to return to their former homes under Greek Cypriot administration. One cannot imagine any Turkish Cypriot leadership, no matter how well disposed to reconciliation and trust between the two communities, agreeing to a settlement that would see them become a minority within their zone or ‘component state’

This means that a political settlement requires certain compromises that are not helped by absolutist declarations about human rights and the perception that one side is the victim and the other the perpetrator of a continuing crime that can easily be solved by the ‘criminal’ stopping the crime of invasion and occupation. Whatever the rights and wrongs of our recent history, there is more than enough blame to share among all the parties involved. We will not make progress simply by trying to address the issues on a legal basis asserting violations of human rights.

Undoubtedly, many on all sides have had their rights violated over the past half century. The final remedy however will not be found in a court or commission, but by political leaders on both sides engaging in good faith in sober and clear sighted negotiations aiming at a compromise solution that addresses the basic concerns of their communities fairly and realistically.

Adopting a rhetoric of fine sounding and high principles may make us feel good or flare up latent nationalistic tendencies, but it does nothing to actually bring us closer to the desired goal. What we need from our politicians whatever their position on the political spectrum is a conscious effort to avoid cheap shots and rhetorical flourishes for political advantage, and a reasoned and diligent effort to explore all the available avenues to break the log jam to a settlement.

Now is not the time to engage in typical politicking when it comes to our national question. All our efforts should be concentrated on cultivating good relations at all levels between our two major communities, and utilising effectively the good offices mission of the Secretary-general to narrow the perceived chasm between their respective positions. The main challenge right now is to work out the issues and other details necessary for the so-called technical committees to get down to work.

Of course, at the end of the day, in a democratic society politicians have a duty to respect the will of the people expressed in free and fair elections. This does not absolve them of the responsibilities of leadership, and politicians in Cyprus on both sides since at least the end of the Second World War have been woefully remiss in giving proper guidance to their communities and avoiding situations that served only to destroy inter-communal amity.

If we are ever to rise above the self-imposed mental chains that spawned the atrocities and violations of human rights that brought our two communities to fear and distrust each other, we must first be honest with ourselves and the sort of Cyprus we envision for succeeding generations.

If we truly want a federal solution we must accept that the other community through its elected representatives and appointed officials will have constitutionally entrenched rights to participate in all the institutions of the federal government, and at least in respect of fundamental rights and communal protections to have certain veto rights. Moreover, we cannot reasonably expect that in the event of disputes, any agreed to settlement procedures will not involve the participation of objective third party adjudicators. Neither can we expect Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots to give up the Treaty of Guarantee rights that Turkey has used to justify its invasion and occupation, at least not until all sides are partners in the EU and possibly NATO.

Life as they say is change. We have moved on since the referenda and all sides to the Cyprus problem have to re-assess the situation in light of the changes taking place not only on Cyprus but throughout the region and the wider Middle East. In one sense, President Papadopoulos is quite correct in stressing the need for any resumed talks to be well prepared. We can ill afford any more failures that do

nothing but confirm the views of many observers that the Cyprus problem has no solution and is best left alone to fester as a de facto partition or until there is another war.

We can do better than that, but it requires courage and honesty on the part of the politicians and at the end of the day by the people who will express their will democratically. Let us hope that these elections will produce a House of Representatives on the Greek Cypriot side that will prevail on the President the need to work diligently and to take bold initiatives and informed risks as he works to carefully prepare the ground for another initiative.