

CIVIC INVOLVEMENT AND SOCIAL CAPITAL CREATION: EVIDENCE FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL SECTOR IN THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

Enikö Baga

Abstract

The existence of a vibrant civil society is widely perceived as a sine qua non condition for the functioning of a democratic system. However, dominant theoretical paradigms link the efficient institutionalisation of democracy with historically created social capital (Putnam, 1993). This paper employs a different approach put forward by democracy theorists Jonathan Fox (1996, 1997) and Douglas Chalmers and others (1997), who analyse the possibilities for civic involvement and the creation of a social capital stock under less than democratic conditions.

The paper applies this theoretical approach to the question of environment protection in the Republic of Cyprus. First, it situates the environmental issue within the general framework of Cypriot society. Using the Akamas controversy as a case study, it then traces the conflict lines and co-operation patterns emerging around the environmental issue. After that, it describes the new forms of social interaction established by the actors involved in the field of environment protection by analysing interview material collected in the course of an academic project in autumn 1999.¹ Finally, it sums up relevant aspects of the Cypriot case and attempts to assess how far the new policy-making patterns observed in the environmental field improve Cypriot society's potential for democratisation.

The Moral Economy of Greek Cypriot Society

By extrapolating Loizos' findings for a particular Cypriot village, one could say that Cypriot society in general can be regarded as a "moral community where everyone shares some common notions of what social prizes are worth competing for" (Loizos, 1975: 61). Every individual is born into a family that supplies him or her with the basic assets necessary for social and economic survival: a name and material provision. Therefore the main objectives of every member of society are to defend the name of the family and to provide for its members. Every actor has

his or her own well-defined position in the social hierarchy. However, other actors who might overtake him or her through the accumulation of wealth or prestige, represent a threat to this position. In order to defend their positions, social actors must therefore continuously compete with each other.

Competitive behaviour, described as a syndrome of "competitive individual familism" (Mavratsas, 1994/1995: 44), has always characterised Cypriot society. In the economic realm competitive, even aggressive, entrepreneurial strategies have brought about impressive growth, often pictured as the Cyprus miracle (Christodoulou, 1992). But even if economic development fostered a rapid urbanisation process, continuously raising educational levels and living standards, the critical assessments of my interview partners suggested that it did not necessarily go along with rising civic consciousness or environmental awareness. An NGO representative commented on the situation as follows:

"We ended up with a society that measures its progress only in construction and economic development, public or private. (...) At the same time, its other values, including its political maturity, haven't moved on."

As civic involvement for the public good is not connected to any visible personal interest that could be understood in terms of increasing the prestige or wealth of oneself or one's family, Cypriot society regards it with suspicion. A person promoting sustainable tourism projects in the Akamas area complained that the villagers

"couldn't understand why an NGO who did not come from the area and had nothing to gain from this was involved in trying to do something for the area".

Moreover, those involved in civic matters are aggressively rejected by others who traditionally perceive activities like the protection of the environment to be threatening to their own status. Because the protection of the environment is not associated with economic benefits, the status competition takes place in the form of a moral conflict. A founding member of the "Friends of the Akamas", an environment NGO concerned with the protection of the Akamas peninsula reported:

"The way they look at you, you are a lunatic or crazy. We were called homosexuals; women who got involved were considered lesbians. Letters were written to different organisations about gays and lesbians who gather in the Akamas and make orgies."

By being labelled lunatics and lesbians, or even spies, environmental activists are denied moral integrity (Argyrou, 1997: 172f). They are symbolically excluded as persons and their civic involvement is regarded as an irrelevant personal hobby.

"The Akamas Issue: The Story of a National Park That Hasn't Happened"²

Due to its remoteness and to the fact that the British army used it for military exercises until recently, the tourism boom has not yet reached the Akamas peninsula. Thus its unique flora and fauna, including several endemic species, have been well preserved. The nesting areas of two rare sea turtle species are also located on the Akamas. In order to protect them, the Fisheries Department established a conservation project in 1978; five beaches were declared a reserve area in 1989.

Nevertheless, this unique project could not bring about the effective protection of the entire area. At the beginning of the 1980s the Town Planning Department elaborated a general management plan for the Akamas, but due to local opposition this plan was never adopted. Beginning in the mid-1980s, when environmental organisations started pleading for the establishment of a natural park plus an absolute building prohibition, the Akamas became a hot issue again. The change of mood towards the Akamas was also based on the fact that public opinion increasingly turned against the British military exercises, which were rejected as a continuation of colonial practices.

Against this background, the Cypriot government requested support from the World Bank for the elaboration of a management plan for the Akamas in 1990. It was expected that international expertise and support would raise the legitimacy of the project in the eyes of Cypriot public opinion. The management plan was financed by the World Bank and completed within the framework of the European Union's Mediterranean Environmental Technical Assistance Programme. It was finalised in 1995 and suggested that the concept of a biosphere reserve was most suitable for the Akamas. According to the plan, the area was to be roughly divided into two major zones: a "natural and agricultural landscape" in the western part and an "agricultural and residential landscape" in the eastern part. It was designed to contain a core ecological area made up of a "wilderness area" and several "sites of ecological value", buffered by "conservation/development" areas for agricultural use exclusively. It was suggested that the construction of family houses should be allowed in "development/conservation" areas, while intensive building and tourism development activities were to be confined to the "village areas".

The Cypriot parliament approved the Conservation Management Plan for the Akamas Peninsula in summer 1998. Still, the government finally chose to ignore the plan's recommendations and agreed on "mild and controlled" development along the Akamas coast.

Conflicts of Interests or a Clash of Civilisations?

As most of the land on the Akamas is privately owned and the liberal legislation makes it easy to change the use of land, only a rigorous enforcement of the Development Freeze recommended by the House Environment Committee would have been able to stop the "wild" tourism development. But this proved to be hardly accomplishable within the framework of a political system characterised by client-patron relationships.

Thus two tourism companies owned by persons related to prominent politicians have already started building luxury hotels. A third case, where agricultural land was to be converted into or exchanged with tourism property to the benefit of a particular developer, confirms accusations that government policies grant "piece-by-piece favourable treatment of large-scale business interests" (Efthymoulou, 2000).

But it is not only the big developers who undermine the environmental policies pursued at least nominally by the state. The inhabitants of the Akamas villages are also mainly interested in tourism development. By comparison with the rest of Cyprus, the development level in terms of the average GDP per capita is lowest in the rural areas of the Paphos district. Additionally, urban-rural disparities are at their highest there (Pikis, 1999). So these villages are not only less developed than the rest of the country, they also strongly resent being in the neighbourhood of the most rapidly developing areas and so far being excluded from reaping similar benefits.

Because the Akamas villages have irrigation problems and suffer from poor access to regional infrastructure, they are subject to out-migration of young families, resulting in population loss and over-aging. As a result they view tourism development not only as a chance to encourage young people to return by offering them better living conditions and job opportunities, but also as a means to catch up with their neighbours. A representative of an international NGO described this attitude as follows:

"In Nicosia we think that Paphos people (...) are villagers and we are treating them as second class citizens. And this is not good, because they know it and they act in the same way. This makes them enemies in a way. It is like a race: who is going to be first, Nicosians or Paphians?"

The liberal disposition of Cypriot society, based on open competition, makes changes in the liberal tax and land policies almost impossible, although these objectively favour the economically strong actors more than the weaker ones. In

contrast to the "view of limited goods" generally applied by Foster (1965) to agrarian societies, Cypriot society seems to be characterised by a view of unlimited resources. Even those who are in a less than optimal situation at present believe that the liberal legal framework provides them with the opportunity for upward social mobility. Therefore the underprivileged social strata not only fail to demand a change in legislation; on the contrary, they actively oppose it.

"Classical" tourism development fits into the world-view of local people as it brings about a direct increase in wealth and an indirect increase in prestige. At the same time "modern" ideas about sustainable development under the guise of agro- or adventure tourism make people suspicious, as they do not produce the expected amount of wealth and also imply a loss of prestige. A representative of the local authorities even suggested in a letter to the editor of an English-language Cypriot newspaper that international organisations and British residents supported the idea of a natural park only in order to keep the area available for military purposes.

Objectively, big developers' exaggerated compensation claims act against the legitimate compensation claims of the villagers as they put a strain on the budget that renders decision-making difficult. But at the same time, big developers are culturally perceived as part of the local communities, as "local boys" who have made their fortune. They themselves also like to stress their biographical connections or at least their life-long sentimental attachment to the area. Moreover, the way they describe themselves as being in a continuous struggle to take over "the best and most expensive tourism project in the world" (Photiades, 1997) further correspond to local attitudes of competition for wealth and prestige.

On the other hand, state officials and environmental activists are also perceived as representatives of "foreign" urban elites. They have no biographical connections with the area and their feelings are directed towards items of nature, which local people consider worthless, if not even hostile. Furthermore, they are definitely weak in terms of wealth and prestige as compared to the big developers. When describing an incident related to the extraction of sand from Toxeftra beach for use in the Tsada golf course, an environmental activist commented:

"We had this feeling of weakness, when we heard the bishop saying: 'I stole sand, so what? Can you steal sand? No, you cannot steal sand. But I am a bishop, I can.'"

Even if the development model promoted by the urban elites can be considered "highly adaptive, efficient and democratic", requiring local involvement and the broad participation of small businesses, it can by no means produce the strong appeal connected with a rapid increase in wealth and prestige.

Typically, the government decision to allow tourism development in the Akamas area gave rise to vehement local protests not because the residents resented the degradation of the local environment, but because they felt discriminated against in favour of the big developers who received special treatment.

Implications for Democratisation

Under these circumstances the establishment of a democratic discourse culture, which recognises the legitimacy of particularistic interests but at the same time requires that compromises should be found according to generally valid rules, seems crucial. Progressive bureaucrats criticised the fact that certain groups of actors refused to accept the arguments of their opponents for political reasons and that certain conflict parties were prevented from expressing their ideas in public. Environmentalists reported that they received threats when they tried to present their points of view in the Akamas villages. Meanwhile their opponents launched a press campaign extolling the expected gains from tourism development to the villagers. Against this backdrop, the emergence of a coalition between Akamas residents, environmentalists and reform-minded technocrats seemed hardly possible.

However, big developers' better access to resources and successful manipulation of cultural symbols is only one of the reasons for the failure of such a broad coalition. The reluctance of the urban middle-class to accept village authorities as partners also hindered the emergence of wider co-operative structures. A representative of an urban NGO involved in projects focusing on sustainable development stated that villagers had to be involved "because if we don't involve them they will never learn (how to do it)". Yet, she went on to say that Mediterranean people were used to paternalistic governments and that villagers, would expect others to make decisions for them. Not only did she not consider the absence of institutional support for local decision-making; she even considered that the local authorities were too "small", "weak" and "inexperienced" to act as proper local self-government bodies.

A reform-minded official from the Town Planning Department further stressed that the involvement of the local communities into decision-making processes should not consist of knowledge transfer only. Co-operation between urban-based technocrats and activists and rural communities should consist of reciprocal learning processes ultimately leading to a change in patterns of reciprocal perception and common action. This was needed in order to achieve broad citizen awareness and involvement in public affairs.

Social Capital Creation and the Thickening of Civil Society

The consolidation of a democratic discourse culture has to be supported by an institutional change in the long run. This approach regards institutions as consisting of "informal constraints and formal rules, and of their enforcement characteristics" (North, 1990: 245).

But, as Putnam's long-term analysis of mesa-level political institutions in Italy has shown, the efficiency of political institutionalisation is determined by the stock of social capital available in the social environment they are embedded in. In this context social capital is defined as "norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement" (Putnam, 1993: 167).

Analysing the conditions for a successful "political construction" of a "thick" civil society, democracy theorist Jonathan Fox describes three "political pathways" leading to the production of social capital in societies which lack the "civic" historical legacy highlighted by Putnam. Accumulation of social capital is regarded as an equivalent of "societal thickness", referring to "the breadth and density of representative societal organisations" (Fox, 1996: 1089). It can be achieved by co-production between state and societal actors, co-production between external and local societal actors, or independent mobilisation from below.

Political opportunities, social energy and ideas, and processes of "scaling up" local representation and bargaining power influence the consolidation of a "thick" civil society (Fox, 1996: 1090f). Analysing the conditions for the emergence and consolidation of civil society in less than democratic regimes, Fox concludes that the contribution of reform-minded officials is crucial. They create positive incentives for autonomous collective action and also buffer the negative sanctions deployed by other state actors against the emerging civic associations. When political opportunities are in place, the ideas and motivations of the actors will decide if and how they will use them. Referring to Hirschman (1984), Fox further concludes that "social energy" tends to be preserved in social systems. The experience of prior mobilisation helps both communities and individuals to mobilise again, even if the prior mobilisation did not achieve its goals. Once created, incipient local forms of civil society need recognition and respect from the other actors. At this stage, supra-local independent organisations can offer support in "scaling-up" an organisation beyond the local level. In conclusion, Fox considers that

"horizontal social organisations are able to grow and spread in inhospitable environments through iterative cycles of conflict between three key actors: the 'social capitalists' themselves, authoritarian elites unwilling to share power, and reformist allies based either within the state or elsewhere in society" (Fox, 1997: 1092).

Although Fox's theory was elaborated on the basis of empirical evidence from Latin America, most of his findings can be applied to the case of environment protection in the Republic of Cyprus as well. Cyprus shares with Latin America colonial past, which delayed the emergence of a home-grown "civic" tradition. In both cases, the creation and consolidation of civil society represents a political project, jointly promoted by NGO activists and reform-minded state officials.

When asked about the role of the state and the NGOs with respect to environmental protection, the head of the Environmental Service in the Ministry for Agriculture and Environment Protection replied that "the goal is the same, but the approach and the priorities have to be different". He considered that while the NGOs were trying to change the system from the outside, their partners in the state agencies were trying to change the system from the inside.

The Cypriot sociologist Caesar Mavratsas considers "authoritarian clientelistic corporatism" to be a definitive feature of Greek Cypriot political culture (Mavratsas, 1998: 67). This political culture corresponds to a political system "dominated by corporate interests providing for a clientelistic hyperpoliticisation and an excessive statism" (ibid). In such a relatively closed political system, civil society functions as an alternative public space, where criticism directed at the dominant structures is formulated and public issues neglected by the dominant political powers are articulated (Axt and Choisi, 1996).

"Trying to balance things out" was therefore considered to be one of the most important functions of the Cypriot NGOs acting in the environmental field. NGOs were necessary, stressed the founder of the Cyprus Turtle Conservation Project, because they formulated things, which had not previously been regarded as an issue for public debate. But even more important seemed to be the fact that being "outside of the typical way of social intervention" they represented a non-clientelistic model for social action that had started to catch on:

"People started reacting and fighting for their rights: regarding the environment, the quality of life, health and all these things . Especially where personal life is affected they resist, they demand, they started shouting and this kind of social awareness is rising".

As far as the state was concerned, its policies regarding the environment were mainly characterised by a laissez-faire attitude. It acted as a negotiator, maintaining a balance between various particularistic interests often organised along the lines of clientelistic networks and at the same time supervising the equitable redistribution of the economic benefits. As benefits kept increasing there was no particular reason for the state to interfere with the market.

This situation has changed because natural resources are becoming scarce. In the future, the state will have to take an active role in safeguarding the general interest of the society in the preservation of the environment. There are already signs pointing to this change of attitude.

Thus, environmentalists and environmental officials described themselves as "a very good team" and were keen to report on their successful co-operation. In this respect there has been a change of attitude towards the state, from lack of confidence and hostility to active support. One environmental activist described this to me in terms of a personal maturing process:

"I very strongly believe, I am not a leftist, nor an anarchist, I used to be that, not anymore, but I say, I came to mature now, I can say there must be a state (...) and I support that state."

In the same way, the House Environment Committee chairman considered the ecologists to be his major partners in co-operation, "whose contribution is extremely interesting and valuable". He further stressed that interaction was based on mutual respect and regarded NGOs as partners in an issue-related debate, since they were not affiliated with clientilistic networks, "they don't sell interest." Similar co-operation patterns emerging between autonomous societal actors and progressive segments of the state bureaucracy have been analysed and described as "associative networks" by the political scientist Douglas Chalmers and his colleagues (Chalmers et al., 1997). They define associative networks as

"first, the sets of individuals or organisations that make claims and second, the mediating entities that debate, reshape and transmit claims and pressures to authoritative decision-making centres" (Chalmers et al., 1997: 564).

Associative networks are therefore different from social movements, because they consist of networks of individuals or organisations integrated through their common preoccupation with certain particular issues. As issue-specific forms of association, they are characterised by diversity and constant reconfiguration. As such, they favour non-hierarchical modes of interaction and create good preconditions for cognitive politics. Coming together within the framework of an associative network in order to achieve a common goal, actors change their reciprocal perception patterns. They are further encouraged to redefine the general framework for political action through common efforts.

These characteristics define associative networks as a particularly favourable environment for the production of social capital. Their issue-specificity and their flexibility enable them to establish relationships between state and societal actors as well as between local and supra-local actors. In the case of the Akamas, both

state and societal actors involved succeeded in mobilising supra-local support from both international organisations like the World Bank or the European Union and transnational advocacy networks like Greenpeace. However, issue-specificity also means that the impact of an associative network may be restricted and that the emergence of an efficient network in a certain policy domain does not imply, overall growth of citizen involvement and political participation. Thus, Cypriot environmentalists have failed in their efforts to include the local population and far have not been successful in ensuring the protection of the Akamas area, either.

Despite growing interconnectedness on both sub- and supranational levels, it is still the national state that exerts decision-making power in the field of environment protection. The outcome of the debates around the issue of the Akamas showed that the local impact of global trends is filtered through local perception patterns. Particularism, as the prevalent disposition of Cypriot society at present, remained triumphant and as long as environment protection was perceived as a marginal issue by Cypriot society at large, a large part of the developments described above tended to go unnoticed. But even if unsuccessful at first sight, mobilisation around the issue of the Akamas certainly generates long-term benefits for the Cypriot society, as it keeps "societal energy" alive and helps to consolidate civil society.

Notes

1. The project was affiliated with the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Europe, Ethnology of the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main and co-ordinated by Prof. Gisela Welz. Interviews were conducted with politicians, government officials, activists of the Green Party, village authorities and residents, local tourism entrepreneurs, and representatives of both Cypriot and international NGOs.

2. The quotation is taken from the homepage of the Cyprus Conservation Foundation.

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