

Prospects for Reunification of Cyprus in 2010?

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Cyprus as an Intractable Conflict

About a decade ago, a former American official involved in the Cyprus conflict stated at a conference, at which I was also invited to talk, that “the Cyprus conflict has become an industry. The number of people who have gotten involved to solve that problem exceeds the number of people who live on this island.” This statement brought home to me the fact that the Cyprus conflict has featured prominently as one of the most intractable and deep-rooted conflicts on the world agenda for almost half a century. It has all the characteristics of an intractable ethno-national conflict, including: the complexity of a conflict involving a number of parties; persistence, including its pervasiveness in most aspects of social and political life; existential fears; loss of hope for a constructive resolution; ethnic victimisation; unaddressed historical grievances and traumas; economic asymmetries; unequal distribution of resources; and structural inequalities (Azar, 1985; Bar-Tal, 2000, Hadjipavlou, 2007). All these characteristics are found in the current situation in Cyprus (Hadjipavlou, 2003 and 2004). According to political psychologists, opponents in ethno-national conflicts tend to “demonise” each other, with each party attributing the causes of suffering or experiences of injustice exclusively to the other. This essentialist view puts all the blame on the enemy and excludes situational factors. “Our side” is righteous and justified in doing what it is doing, whereas “the other side” is inherently aggressive and acts the way it does because “it has always been like that.”

Another factor that is played up in intractable conflicts is the role of external forces, such as colonial and post-

colonial politics, foreign interventions such as Cold War politics, and regional interests. This factor is also true in the case of Cyprus. According to Coleman (2000), intractable conflicts tend to be made up of multiple issues relating to resources, values, power and basic human needs. Coleman also emphasises the time factor, stating that “intractable conflicts have an extensive past, a turbulent present and a murky future.” This is made even more complex due to the hatred, fear and, often, the atrocities committed by the other side, which are difficult to let go of in order to move into a new relationship with the “former enemy.” Such features apply in the case of Cyprus. In addition, many intractable conflicts, like the Cyprus one, are embedded in a context of long-standing differences and inequalities stemming from colonialism, ethnocentrism, and human rights abuses. Such conditions create power imbalances or what Azar (1990) called “structural victimisation,” according to which lower-status groups are harmed by basic social structures of society. Human needs theory (Burton, 1990; Kelman, 1990, 1997) assumes that deep-rooted conflicts are caused by unmet basic human needs. To this end, Burton cites identity, security, recognition, participation and justice as ontological needs. In Cyprus, identity and security needs have been contested issues, as have justice and recognition. Related to this is the condition of alienation, which arises due to a lack of communication and contacts. Such an environment leads to an increase in stereotyping and misperceptions. Both economic and social inequalities have been experienced by the Turkish Cypriot community, especially from 1963 to 1974 and thereafter. The Greek Cypriots have run the Republic of Cyprus, and enjoyed all the state privileges, since 1963. At the same time, they experience Turkey as a constant threat, particularly since the events of 1974, when security became a major issue. This was reflected in the referendum in April 2004. Some 67% of the Turkish Cypriot community voted “Yes” to the

Annan Plan and to reunification and entry of the whole of Cyprus in the European Union, whereas 76% of the Greek Cypriot community voted against the Plan.

This result was indeed a shift in the recent political and social history of the island. The island became a member of the European Union in May 2004, and the Cyprus government, consisting of Greek Cypriots only, is the sole representative of the divided island. The Turkish Cypriots felt very frustrated and let down by the Greek Cypriots and interpreted the referendum result as the Greek Cypriots rejecting them. The Greek Cypriots felt their human rights and security concerns were not addressed under the Annan Plan. There have been many analyses of why the Plan failed. In my view, one general reason could be that we have not created a *culture of solution* and co-existence among the different communities in Cyprus, a long-term process that should have started long before the referenda. A deadlock ensued with fears of "Taiwanisation" and deepening of the separation.

The Prospects for Reunification Today

What has changed since the defeat of the Annan Plan and the election of a new president in the Greek Cypriot community in 2008? Are there new signs of progress and the necessary political will for reunification and to reach an agreement on the model of a bi-communal, bi-zonal federation? The rest of this article will try to address these questions.

In the presidential elections in the Republic of Cyprus in February 2008, the Greek Cypriots elected Dimitris Christofias, the secretary-general of the communist party AKEL, as the first leftist president. For the first time since the 2004 referendum and the failure of the "Annan Plan," which led to a renewed environment of mistrust, betrayal and frustration between the two sides, a new possibility and the hope that the Cyprus conflict could be resolved were seen to arise based on the fact that Cyprus now had two leftist leaders who believed in reunification. Personally, I found three of the new president's initial statements very significant, and this made me believe that a new political culture might gradually be created. First was his statement that he "wished to find a solution by the Cypriots for the Cypriots." It is the first time a Greek Cypriot leader has stated so clearly what many of us in the bi-communal and rapprochement movement have been promoting. This principle calls for us to undertake our own responsibility as Cypriots for working towards

a solution, which should be devoid of outside interference. It is a departure from the "blame the other" and conspiracy theory models that prevail in Cypriot political culture. Second, in all his public speeches Christofias refers not only to the Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat but *a/so* to the Turkish Cypriot community at large, which has enhanced its presence and visibility in the Greek Cypriot public debate and mindset, while also strengthening awareness of interdependence. Third, Christofias has said that "we need to prepare our society for a solution," which means it is not enough simply to "want a solution," but rather that we must also build a culture of solution. This will require public acknowledgment of mutual past mistakes, mutual forgiveness for past injuries and trauma, changes in the educational systems and media to make them institutions of reconciliation and co-existence, and empowerment of civil society and legitimisation of its contribution to peace building, for, as Harold Saunders said, "Some things states can do and other things citizens." Was this the inauguration of a new consensual and inclusive model?

Mr Christofias and Mr Talat met in the presence of a United Nations representative on 21 March 2008 and agreed, among other things, to open the Ledra Street/Lokmaci crossing point in divided Nicosia, which happened ten days later. This was, indeed, a historic and symbolic moment and the result of mobilisation of citizens from both communities. Ledra Street had been barbed wired since 1963 after the first violent inter-communal clashes. This move led to renewed people-to-people contacts and the reconnection of shop owners and old neighbours.

Another decision of the two leaders was to appoint working groups and expert committees to brainstorm on the different aspects of the conflict – governance, property, security, cultural heritage, economics, the European Union, development, etc. These committees and groups have started work. The committees are predominantly made up of men from both communities; the stark absence of women is a reminder of the lack of democracy and gender equality in Cyprus, as well as a breach of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 from 2000.

Both leaders also expressed their willingness to work towards a bi-communal, bi-zonal federation as soon as possible. Both expected the aforementioned committees and working groups to produce substantive results on the various issues before they met again in late May 2008 to evaluate the results and hoped to start negotiations by the end of June. The atmos-

phere generated by the media and internationally was one of possibility and renewed optimism. The two leaders have known each other for a long time and have cooperated in the past, and this personal relationship was surely a factor in their commitment to make a change. When Talat told Christofias in one of their early meetings, "If we fail to reunite the island, partition will ensue," Christofias replied with tears in his eyes, "I know it. That is why I ran for president." In the early months, all the polls regarding Christofias's term in office were favourable. Seventy-five percent approved of his fulfilling his promises and staying faithful to his election programme. Moreover, for the first time, Greek Cypriots largely approved of co-existence with Turkish Cypriots and of working in the same sectors (85%), as well as of frequenting the same leisure venues (82%); they also approved of the presence of Turkish Cypriot children in mixed schools (88%). Twenty-nine percent of the refugees said that, in the event of a solution, they would have no problem living under a Turkish Cypriot administration in the Turkish Cypriot constituent state. These were, indeed, big changes at the societal level compared to polling under the Papadopoulos administration. They constituted significant data, which the governing elites could have used to inform their negotiating agenda and reinforce the will to find a solution.

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Another important factor is that the European Union, together with Britain, the United States, Greece and Turkey, favours a solution. Some of the biggest current concerns among Greek Cypriots, however, are Turkey's position and its domestic crisis, as well as its problematic process towards EU harmonisation. There are also Greek Cypriot political parties that constantly stress the fact that Mr Talat cannot act independently of Ankara and the Turkish National Security Council. This perception is true up to a point, but it should also be mentioned that the Turkish Cypriot community has shown that it can mobilise and organise protests like those of 2002 and 2003, which resulted in a change

in leadership and the opening of checkpoints along the Green Line enabling people-to-people contacts. This new dynamic could have been channelled into political initiatives by the leadership on both sides to encourage and legitimate the peace-building process at the grassroots level. There is thus a Turkish Cypriot dynamic that, when reactivated, can not only receive messages from Ankara, but also send them. The leadership factor cannot in and of itself bring about change; a well-informed polity and strong civil society, which are still lacking in Cyprus, are also needed.

Most Recent Initiatives and Future Challenges

Another change since Cyprus entered the EU has been the granting of €249 million to the Turkish Cypriot community to build infrastructure, educate citizens about EU laws and principles, and contribute to reconciliation efforts in the non-governmental sector. In addition, the EU has been organising seminars and public forums in which citizens from both communities participate with a view to promoting reunification, reconciliation and cooperation. Today there are six checkpoints along the Green Line and another one, in the Limnitis area, is expected to open soon with EU funding. All these gestures, along with the constant visits by EU officials to the island, are proof of the EU's support of the peace process and search for a solution. The peace talks between Christofias and Talat have been going on for the last eighteen months, and it has been announced that the chapters on governance (the federal and constituent units and their competencies) have largely been agreed upon. Substantial progress has also been made on the issues of the economy and the European Union. Thus, a lot of ground has been covered, and the United Nations and its expert teams are available to offer their good offices whenever the leaders express the need. The thorniest issues remaining to be settled are those relating to property and security. The British court's ruling in the Ormas-Apostolides case, along with the latest decision by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg concerning the property issue, has further complicated the talks on property. According to the ECHR ruling, Greek Cypriots must now apply to an "immovable property commission" in north Cyprus, set up by Turkey, with the power to restore property or reward compensation. Only if the applicant is not satisfied with this com-

mission's decision may s/he apply to the ECHR. The Greek Cypriots have expressed great displeasure at the ruling, whereas Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot elites expressed satisfaction. Some politicians on both sides viewed this latest development as a factor that will speed up the negotiations between the Cypriot leaders. Mr Talat is up for re-election in April, and his opponent, Mr Eroglu, who does not favour a bi-communal, bi-zonal federation, is currently ahead in the polls. There is speculation that if the peace talks move ahead prior to the elections, together with the ECHR decision, they could assist Talat in his re-election.

In March, after meeting for the first time with a group of Greek Cypriot journalists and politicians in Ankara, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan proposed convening a seven-party high-level meeting in which the leaders of the two communities, the prime ministers of Greece and Turkey, Britain, the EU and the UN Secretary General would participate with the aim of boosting and empowering the peace process. For the time being, the Greek Cypriot leader and almost all the political parties have rejected this call for fear that the status of the Republic of Cyprus might be undermined. In my view, this is a major opportunity for all concerned parties to really seek a solution and for Turkey to exhibit its good faith and prove its professed commitment to a solution that includes the withdrawal of the 35,000 Turkish troops from the northern part of the island. There is thus a dynamic for reunification, although a lot of hard work remains to be done on both the macro and micro levels.

A Concluding Thought

Solving the Cyprus conflict would have a positive impact not only on the relations between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, between Greece and Turkey, and between Turkey and the EU, but also in the nearby troubled Middle East. This may explain the renewed interest of the international community, of Britain and the US, and of the European Commission mediators. A solution would allow Turkey to recognise the Republic and open its ports and airport to Cypriots, as well as facilitate Turkey's EU accession process. Economic and cultural exchanges would resume and a culture of co-existence and a new history of normal relations would gradually arise. The difficult issues at stake demand political courage, brave decisions, risk-taking, trust and a commitment to the future. I believe the two Cypriot leaders can achieve all this with sup-

port at both the domestic and international level. It would be an example of good leadership, good faith and a commitment to a shared and peaceful future. To this end, if the intractable Cyprus conflict were resolved, it would generate positive momentum for other protracted conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so close to Cyprus. Finally, a solution would teach the next generation of Cypriot children about co-existence, valuing difference, democracy, gender equality and love for their whole country.

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