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Election 2003: How the Turkish Cypriot community was prevented from Expressing Their Political Will

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1 Introduction

On December 14th, 2003 the long awaited parliamentary elections took place in northern Cyprus, i.e. in the Turkish Cypriot community. These elections were considered to be of critical importance by both the Turkish Cypriots themselves and also by the international community. The opposition took a strong pre-election stance against Denktash's (Leader of the regime in north Cyprus) policies and those who supported them. There was also some optimism from the Turkish front where Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gül have been developing a pro-EU policy in support of a rapid, "Annan Plan"-based solution to the Cyprus problem. This was an unprecedented event in history as the Turkish Cypriot opposition has generally defended a policy contrary to that of the Turkish government.

However, as was pointed out in an earlier report by Cyprus Action Network [1], there were serious irregularities during the elections, especially the presence of thousands of "citizens" of Turkish origin, who were brought to the island as part of a governmental policy to change the country's demographics. Some Turkish Cypriot organizations, particularly Patriotic Unity Movement (PUM), viewed these irregularities as reasons to boycott the elections, claiming that both the elections themselves and the formation of the government afterwards would be dictated by Ankara and not by the free-will of Turkish Cypriots.

Even though an opposition party, Republican Turkish Party (RTP, headed by Mehmet Ali Talat), that ran on a pro-EU, pro-Annan Plan platform, emerged as the first party, it did not gather enough seats to form a government. Another opposition party, the Peace and Democracy Movement (PDM, headed by Mustafa Akıncı), that ran on a slightly more radical platform, came third. Collectively, the two parties gathered 25 seats which led to a temporary dead-lock in the parliament which has a total of 50 seats. The dead-lock was resolved by the direct interference of Ankara creating what, in our opinion, is the best compromise position for Ankara and Denktash: a coalition between the RTP and the Democratic Party (DP, headed by Serdar Denktash, son of “president” Denktash, and junior partner of the previous governing coalition).

Even the formation of the government did not happen without significant irregularities. A row erupted in the parliament when DP tried to appoint three ministers who did not reside in Cyprus. Another one followed when the RTP-DP coalition tried to block the ex-prime-minister, Eroglu’s National Unity Party (NUP) from electing a deputy chair of the parliament. These irregularities were tolerated by Denktash because of the green-light from Ankara.

In this report, we outline some irregularities that occurred during this election process and during the subsequent formation of the government by a coalition of RTP and DP. An extensive set of references are provided in the Appendix to make the case that the election process has resulted in *the obstruction of the expression of the Turkish Cypriot community’s will*. This point should be well understood and repeated in all platforms since it affects the solution process to the Cyprus problem.

2 Summary of Irregularities and External Influence

In this section, we offer a list of irregularities both in the pre- and post-election period. Each of these points is based on an extensive review of the material that appeared in the press, and the reader is referred to the relevant articles that can be found in the Appendix which support our statements.

2.1 Pre-Election Period

- Turkish settlers and “artificial” citizens of Turkish origin have played a major role in the elections. They form the majority of the electorate and it is estimated that they have voted en masse for governing parties in certain localities. For example, the right wing parties far exceeded their country-wide performance in the district of Iskele which contains a much higher percentage of settlers than the other districts. An organized effort was also made to increase the number of artificial citizens prior to the elections while scare-tactics and bribery were used to control their vote. (Appendices 4.1 and 4.3.1)

- The governing coalition in north Cyprus used unconstitutional, illegal means to affect the election results abusing its powers and privileges;
 1. Government-controlled television and radio stations actively promoted pro-governmental propaganda during the election campaign period, broadcasting programs against the opposition. (Appendix 4.2.1)
 2. Employment in the civil service was used as a tool to both threaten and entice voters. The public was threatened that they may lose their jobs if they supported the opposition. Hundreds of 'fake' positions were created and announced in the media to gain voter support. (Appendix 4.2.2)
 3. Land confiscated from Greek Cypriots was illegally distributed to families in villages by government authorities in an effort to get votes from those families. (Appendix 4.2.3)
 4. Citizenship officers, supported by the government, worked overtime to grant thousands of illegal citizenships to Turkish settlers. (Appendices 4.1.1,4.1.2 and 4.1.3)
 5. The president, whose active participation in parliamentary elections is unconstitutional, made numerous appearances at events organized by the ruling parties and made speeches urging people to vote for these parties. He also toured Anatolia and gathered support for the incumbent government. (Appendix 4.3)
- The Turkish army used its resources in the island and in mainland Turkey against the opposition. Army officials visited villages inhabited mainly by Turkish settlers and directed the inhabitants to vote en masse for the governing parties. Army officials and their civilian contacts in the Turkish government used their resources to influence policy-making (in Turkey) and the Turkish Cypriot electorate. (Appendix 4.4.1)
- Nationalist organizations with ties to paramilitary organizations operated against the opposition with the implicit support of the governing coalition. Opposition parties and personalities were threatened, political party buildings were vandalized and activists were harassed. (Appendices 4.4.2 and 4.4.3) ¹
- Police-force and courts were used by the governing coalition to intimidate and threaten the opposition. Opposition campaigners were stopped from carrying out their campaigns on some occasions. Some activists were threatened with law suits. In a clearly discriminatory manner, the judicial authorities failed to take legal action when governing coalition parties violated election rules. (Appendix 4.4.3)

¹The authorities have to date failed and been unwilling to investigate these cases. As many other previous cases of political terror [2]

2.2 Post-Election Period

- Mr. Denktash abused his powers and threatened both the elected parties and the people. He used political tactics to delay and complicate the formation of the government. (Appendix 4.5.1)
- Turkey has interfered in the formation of the government. Party leaders were summoned to Ankara within less than a day's notice following a summit at the president's residence. The leaders were briefed on what was acceptable by Turkey and were intimidated by clearly receiving signals that unless Turkey approves a government, they will not be able to form one. At the same time Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Gül made announcements outlining the Turkish government's position on the Annan plan without any input from the Turkish Cypriots. A day later, Denktash met Prime Minister Erdoğan in Istanbul. (Appendix 4.5.2)
- Generals from the Turkish army made strong statements against the pro-EU, pro-solution groups. One general openly called them "traitors". The army chiefs first announced their disapproval of Erdoğan's statements (mentioned above), which was then re-stated by the foreign ministry and an alliance was forged. (Appendices 4.5.3 and 4.5.4)
- The National Security Council (MGK) which includes the army chiefs, the president and the Prime Minister of Turkey announced an urgent summit for January 23rd, where they would decide on the final Turkish position. This was done while the Turkish Cypriot government was being formed and directly influenced the formation of the government. (Appendix 4.5.5)
- Following these developments, RTP, the strongest party, decided to form a coalition with DP, the junior party of the previous governing coalition and left-out its pre-election ally PDM since it was not approved by Turkey. This was in violation of a protocol RTP signed with two other opposition parties where they declared that they would refuse to get in a coalition with either NUP or DP. Both parties announced that they will wait until MGK decision to take any steps regarding Cyprus. (Appendix 4.5.2)
- While the government was being formed, it was revealed that three ministers appointed by DP did not reside in Cyprus. This was against the TRNC constitution. This led to a serious row in the parliament and a delay in the formation of the government. The governing parties tried to change the parliament regulations to block the election of deputy chair of the parliament by NUP. These cast a shadow on the legitimacy and competency of the governing coalition. (Appendix 4.5.1)
- The new Prime Minister, Mehmet Ali Talat was summoned to Ankara days before the National Security Council meeting where he received briefings on the Turkish position. Denktash followed him to Ankara where he tried to manipulate the government and public opinion once more. (Appendices 4.5.2 and 4.5.5)

- The National Security Council met on January 23rd, announcing its support for negotiations “with reference to” the Annan plan. It also demanded a new UN mediator, calling for structural changes in the way the negotiations are being carried out. Although promising in appearance, this tactic signals a maneuver by Ankara to delay foreign pressure and negotiations beyond the May 1st, 2004, the date for the island’s EU accession. The language used in the resulting declaration, statements referring to “the realities on the island” and the ambiguous reference to the Annan Plan raised red flags in the international community. Again, this decision was reached without any participation of the Turkish Cypriot community. (Appendix 4.5.5)

3 Conclusions

In conclusion, the Cyprus Action Network believes that the political will of the Turkish Cypriot community is not being represented by the current government in north Cyprus which is under direct control of the Republic of Turkey. The election period was full of irregularities that stifled the democratic process. The subsequent formation of the government took place not in Nicosia but in Ankara. Turkey has reconciled the pro-EU forces and those against them under a compromise position of Erdoğan’s government and the traditional civilian-military bureaucracy.

In this report, we have provided a list of sources which support our observations. We call, once more, for an internationally monitored census and free, democratic elections in the Turkish Cypriot community.

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4 Appendix: Media Reports and other Sources

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