ROTATING PRESIDENCY AND CROSS VOTING AS GAME CHANGERS

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The current constitution of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) provides for separate political representation between Greek and Turkish Cypriots -the two major communities of the island; a direct effect of British colonial legacy. This is vividly reflected in presidential politics where the constitution stipulates that the Greek Cypriots (GCs) elect the president of the country and the Turkish Cypriots (TCs) the vice-president. The cabinet, according to the constitution, comprises 10 members: the GC president appoints seven GC ministers and the TC vice-president three TC members. Between them the president and the vice-president share all vital political powers including the right of veto as a means to maintain the balance between the two communities. The veto was particularly designed to safeguard the TC community from majoritarian decisions taken by the Greek majority but it proved to be a constant source of problems and tension.

In the short and turbulent period that the RoC actually functioned -from 1960 to 1963 and before the TCs withdrew from the state and government institutions in 1964- the two communities remained totally independent/separate from each other at the political level. The 10-member cabinet functioned on a purely communal basis: the GCs acted based solely on their community interests and the same did the TCs. The possible consequences of the cabinet members' decisions upon the other community incurred no political cost for them since their selection did not depend upon voters from both communities. In the contrary, polarization and political competition with the 'others' solidified further their political presence. As a result, the Cypriot political and power system practically rewarded intransigent and extremist approaches, political forces and politicians and made division between the two communities an inherent feature of the political system and particularly the executive branch.

Throughout the long history of the negotiations, the leaders of both communities never questioned this divisive provision for political representation, thus prolonging a past practice of separation. However, this changed in 2010 when the former leaders of the two communities achieved a consensus for a comprehensive system of political representation based on two axes: rotating presidency between the elected leaders of the two communities and cross voting between the two communities for a first time in Cyprus political history. The voting formulae stipulated that in the case of the GCs their vote will be weighted in order to equal the number of the TCs that will vote for the GC candidate and vice versa.

The aim behind this proposal was to eliminate a basic source of conflict within the system of representation and particularly the executive, which was a crucial -but not the sole- reason for the ineffectiveness of the existing constitution. The proposed formulae represents an effort to disconnect vote from solely ethnic criteria and make the two elected leaders dependent upon the vote of voters from both communities. In this way, it is thought that unifying trends can prevail within the political system and society at large.

According to this proposal those standing for election although not on a joint ticket -as provided in the initial proposal of the then GC leader- they will need to address the 'other' ethnic audience since their votes will count in the result. Given the long history of separation and other practical impediments this proposal provides for a systemic motive to seek cooperation between candidates and parties, which will extend to other areas as well. Hence, more synergies will be created. Parties and candidates will need to include in their programmes and their campaigns issues important for the other community and propose solutions. For a party or a politician to remain relevant in the federal political system they must seek for alliances with the 'other' community. In a context where every vote counts it is assumed that it will provide utilitarian motivation for all political forces and politicians to link with the other community. In the long-run, it is expected that this system will turn Cyprus politics away from ethnic forms of confrontation and towards class and ideological lines of opposition.

Although this consensus is yet to be officially agreed, it still remains a possible game changer regarding the future of Cyprus and the peaceful coexistence/cooperation between the two communities. It also points to the context of the federal solution we should be aiming for, i.e., creating institutions and norms infused with the logic of bringing the two communities together. Other examples in this direction could include a common health system, a common social security system, a prospectively common education system, etc.