

THE SHOWDOWN FOR THE NEW TURKISH CYPRIOT LEADERSHIP Federalists vs Ankara's bloc

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Abstract

At a time when the open fronts in the Eastern Mediterranean are multiplying, and the future of the federal formula for the solution of the Cyprus Problem is, according to the messages arriving from the UN and Ankara, questionable two opposing blocs will compete at the forthcoming 'presidential elections' of the Turkish Cypriot community. On the one hand, the federalist bloc strives to keep the federal vision and the bi-communal cooperation alive. On the other, Ankara's bloc believes that it is time to close the chapter of federation once and for all.

Introduction: The 'elections' amidst a pandemic and socio-political turbulences

The Turkish Cypriot (T/C) community is going to the polls to elect its new leadership, three years after the failure of the Crans-Montana talks for the final solution of the Cyprus Problem.¹ The increasing tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the stagnation observed in the Cyprus Issue attach great importance to the Turkish Cypriot's choice. The 'elected' leader of the community and his associates will determine to a great extent the future of the federal solution of the Cyprus Problem as well as that of the bi-communal relations. Furthermore, the outcome of this countdown is expected to impact in a wide range of issues, including energy in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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¹ Euripides Antoniadis, "The Talks on the Cyprus Problem at Crans-Montana, Switzerland (28.06 – 07.07.17) and the Greek-Cypriot Press: The Views of Newspapers Alithia, Politis and Haravgi", *Mediapolis – Revista de Comunicação, Jornalismo e Espaço Público*, no. 10 (June 4, 2020): 47–64, https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-6019_10_4

A total of 11 candidates will participate in the 2020 'presidential elections' which were previously postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and are scheduled for October 11. If one of the candidates does not secure a majority of the 'votes' during the first Sunday, a run-off election will follow. Two distinct blocs are competing in the race for the nomination of the new T/C leadership: the bloc of those who support the federal solution and the opposing bloc which works closely with Turkey. Candidates who have little hope of success also participate in the 'elections'.

In 2015, Mustafa Akıncı, who was the candidate of the pro-federal solution bloc succeeded over the candidate of the pro-Turkish bloc during the second leg of the 'elections' and emerged as the new T/C leader. Throughout the following two years, the parties involved in the new process of negotiations for the solution of the Cyprus Problem failed to reach a final agreement.² Subsequently, the disagreements between the supporters of the two blocs grew stronger. Moreover, it is worth noting that the 'presidential elections' will take place amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the economic crisis affecting both Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community and the sporadic turbulences in the Ankara-T/C community axis.

The federalist bloc

In the 'presidential elections' of 2020, the T/C federalist bloc offers two candidates. First, Mustafa Akıncı, who is the current leader of the Turkish Cypriots and a firm believer to the vision of the reunification of Cyprus. The former leader of the social-democratic movement has extensive experience in the Turkish Cypriot political scene. The second candidate, Tufan Erhürman, is the leader of the Republican Turkish Party (Cumhuriyetçi Türk Partisi). The experienced law professor has served as a member of the T/C negotiating team on the Cyprus Issue and as a 'prime minister' for a brief period.

During recent years, Akıncı has publicly disagreed with Ankara's strategy on a variety of issues. For instance, he criticised Turkey's invasion of Syria, leading to the harsh reproach from Ankara and nationalist circles.³ Moreover, Akıncı participates in the 'presidential elections' having come into an open confrontation with Ankara mainly due to his adherence to the position that the federal solution is the only viable formula for Cyprus. The T/C leader rejects Ankara's belief that the time has come to seek 'alternative models of the solution' to the Cyprus Issue and insists that the federal formula is the only solution that could carry the approval of the Greek Cypriots (G/Cs) and the international community:

² "KKTC'de Yeni Cumhurbaşkanı Mustafa Akıncı Oldu", Hürriyet, April 26, 2015, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/kktcde-yeni-cumhurbaskani-mustafa-akinci-oldu-28839813>

³ "Barış Pınarı Harekatı - Ankara'dan Kuzey Kıbrıs Lideri Akıncı'ya Tepki: 'Bu Açıklamalar Kara Lekedir'", BBC Türkçe, October 13, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-50032041>

“(After the elections) the UN Secretary-General Guterres will conduct consultations and announce the date of the new international conference. In my opinion, it is clear what is possible in Cyprus. I don't see a way to give up the UN parameters. Some friends are insisting on creating two separate states, confederation, with the logic that the federation is obsolete. There's no such option”.⁴

Tufan Erhürman shares Akinci's opinion that there is currently no question of alternative formulas in the Cyprus Problem. For the T/C professor, the federal solution remains the only viable formula for the reunification of Cyprus.⁵ Besides, Erhürman, like the T/C leader, does not adopt the assumption of unilateral steps regarding the closed city of Famagusta.

However, Erhürman applies strong criticism towards Akinci's leadership by accusing it of negligence and passiveness. According to Erhürman, during the past five years, Akinci did not pursue the solution of the Cyprus Problem aggressively and effectively. Furthermore, he argues that Akinci 'neglected' the cultivation of the relations and contacts between the T/C and international communities and did not take a firm stance in his relations with Ankara.

Ankara's bloc

In this analysis, with the term the 'Ankara's bloc' we refer to the group of candidates for the T/C leadership, who generally share the positions of the Turkish government on a wide range of issues, such as the Cyprus Problem, energy and other matters concerning the Eastern Mediterranean. 'Prime Minister' Ersin Tatar, who is one of these candidates, is described as one of the big favourites of the 2020 'presidential elections' by T/C and Turkish analysts. Tatar is the leader of the Turkish Right and its biggest party, the 'National Union Party (Ulusal Birlik Partisi, UBP)'. In the last 'parliamentary elections', his party secured the popular vote but not the majority of seats in the 'parliament', leading thus to the formation of the 'coalition government'. After a period of turbulent consultations with his party, Tatar announced his candidacy for the T/C leadership. The 'Prime Minister' supports the 'two-state solution' for the Cyprus Problem, which is also widely discussed in Ankara:

“(After my election) I'll be ready to meet with the Greek Cypriot side. I will bring to the table alternative solutions outside the federation framework with the support of an expert advisory delegation that we will be established in the Presidency. However, I have no intention of taking part in any process whose purpose and schedule will not be clear”.⁶

⁴ “KKTC Cumhurbaşkanı Akıncı: Seçimlere Dışarıdan Müdahaleye Dair İpuçları Var”, Euronews, September 8, 2020, <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/09/07/kktc-cumhurbaskan-akinci-secimlere-disaridan-mudahaleye-dair-ipuclar-var-ozel>

⁵ “Erhürman: 'Çözüm Olanağı Federasyon'", Güncel Kıbrıs, 2020, <https://www.guncelkibris.com/erhurman-cozum-olanaqi-federasyon/>

⁶ “KKTC'de Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Ersin Tatar Vizyonunu Açıkladı”, Anadolu Ajansı, September 16, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/kkctcde-cumhurbaskani-adayi-ersin-tatar-vizyonunu-acikladi/1975159>

The leader of the junior partner in Tatar's 'coalition government' also takes part in the forthcoming 'elections' as an independent candidate. Like Tatar, the 'Assistant Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs', Kudret Özersay, who maintains a close dialogue with Ankara, does not believe that the federal solution of the Cyprus Problem is possible. The experienced politician and professor of international relations who has served as a member of various T/C negotiating teams since the beginning of the 2000s believes that the time has come to discuss alternative formulas. The leader of the third-largest party of the T/C community believes that the G/C and the T/C sides can begin cooperating in specific fields, e.g. energy issue, before achieving the solution of the Cyprus Problem. As part of this evolutionary approach, he does not rule out increasing the number of areas of cooperation in the future.⁷ Moreover, Özersay is one of the initiators of the idea of opening the closed city of Famagusta under T/C administration, a project which is also supported by Turkey.

Among the candidates of 'Ankara's bloc' is the leader of the Renaissance Party (Yeniden Doğuş Partisi, YDP), Erhan Arıklı. The independent candidate is mainly supported by the settlers. The independent candidate from the Nationalist Democracy Party (Milliyetçi Demokrasi Partisi, MDP), which maintains close relations with the Turkish nationalist movement of the Grey Wolves, also comes from the T/C Right. In general, T/C and Turkish analysts estimate that these nominations have little chance of success.

The 'outsiders'

In the 2020 'presidential elections', other political actors have followed the examples of Akıncı and Özersay by submitting their independent candidacies. In an attempt to speak to the whole of society, the candidates choose to rise above the political factions. Nevertheless, according to the latest estimates and analyses, they are unlikely to succeed in the 'elections'.

One of these independent candidates is the son of the historic leader of the Turkish Cypriot community, Rauf Denктаş. Despite the low percentage he secured in the recent polls,⁸ Serdar Denктаş chose to resign his position as President of the T/C Democratic Party and participate in the upcoming 'elections'. Unlike other candidates of the T/C Right, the Denктаş family's relations with Ankara over the past decades have been tenuous. In the 2000s, the Denктаş family disagreed with the idea of supporting the Annan Plan. Also, Rauf Denктаş had until the end of his life close relations with Turkey's political circles opposing Erdoğan's government. True to the political heritage of his family, Serdar Denктаş also kept his distance from the Turkish governments.

⁷ "Özersay: 'Kapsamlı Çözümde Önce Doğal Gazın Paylaşımı Konusunda İş Birliği Yapılabilir'", Kıbrıs Postası, September 10, 2020, https://www.kibrispostasi.com/c35-KIBRIS_HABERLERI/n347051-ozersay-kapsamli-cozumden-once-dogal-gazin-paylasimi-konusunda-is-birligi-yapilabilir

⁸ For example see "Gezici Anketi'ne Göre Tatar 2'nci Turda Kazanıyor", Kıbrıs Postası, 2020, https://www.kibrispostasi.com/c35-KIBRIS_HABERLERI/n345234-gezici-anketine-gore-tatar-2nci-turda-kazaniyor

Unlike the two aforementioned right-wing candidates, Serdar Denktaş participates in the 'elections' with a political manifesto that does not rule out the prospect of a federal solution.⁹ According to the experienced politician, if the G/C side accepts the political equality of the T/Cs at all levels, then the appropriate ground for the creation of a decentralised federation could emerge. In that case, the founding states would have enhanced powers. This scenario was widely discussed in the Cypriot news when it was presented by the G/C leadership as a possible formula which would help the parties involved in the negotiations to overcome the impasse.

Conclusion: Akıncı versus Ankara

Historical experience has shown that the primary responsibility of the 'President of the TRNC' is to represent the Turkish Cypriot community at the negotiating table. In this capacity, T/C leaders have been negotiating over the last half-century with the G/C side and attempting to promote the T/C proposal for the solution of the Cyprus Problem to the UN and the international community.

The developments of the last five years in Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the recent messages of the UN and Ankara, which we have briefly underlined above, lead us to the assumption that two opposing blocs are challenging each other in the forthcoming 'presidential elections'. First, the federalist bloc which fights to keep the vision of the federation and bi-communal cooperation alive and second, Ankara's bloc which believes that the time has come to close the chapter of federation once and for all.

In the forthcoming 'presidential elections', the Turkish Cypriot voters will be asked to answer a crucial question: Which of the visions mentioned above do they believe in? The answer to this question will largely determine both the future relations of the two communities of Cyprus as well as those of the T/C community with Turkey and the international community.

In the October showdown, Akıncı appears to be 'one step ahead' of his opponents, and that is for two crucial reasons. First, the candidates of the federalist and Ankara's blocs are supported by Turkish Cypriot political formations whose forces have been divided in recent years. For instance, during the previous 'presidential elections' Erhürman's party was excluded from the first round, while at the same time, Tatar's party faces widespread internal divisions. The T/C Right camp has also failed to put forth a convincing proposal regarding the alternative formulas for the solution of the Cyprus Problem. All the relevant remarks were characterised by vagueness and did not have any impact on the G/C side and the international community.

Second, Turkey's relations with the T/C community have faced several problems during the past decade. As a result, Ankara's close associates in the northern part of Cyprus have been failing to obtain a secure footing in the community,

⁹ "Manifesto 2020 Serdar Denktaş", 2020, <https://serdardenktaş.com/manifesto-2020/>

especially since the 2013-2018 period. This may also have an unfavourable impact on the candidates belonging to Ankara's bloc.

Therefore, the turmoil in the relations of Turkey and the T/C community and the fragmentation of the political forces supporting his opponents reinforces Akıncı's prospects for re-election. However, we should not take Akıncı's victory for granted mainly due to his performance regarding the Cyprus Issue. Many of his opponents accuse him that since mid-2017 he has been losing valuable time for the restoration and the strengthening of bi-communal relations. The hostile atmosphere created in Cyprus, Greek-Turkish relations and the Eastern Mediterranean did not help the T/C federalists. Moreover, the T/C community's multidimensional dependence on Turkey was strengthened during the Covid-19 pandemic, which is expected to have a decisive impact on the outcome of the 'elections'. For all these reasons, it could be said that Akıncı in the upcoming 'elections' will also be facing another 'opponent': His 'self' and his 'supporters'. In this context, the Turkish Cypriot Left, centrist and undecided voters, will decide whether the vision of the reunification of Cyprus deserves a second opportunity or not.

Nevertheless, even if Akıncı manages to rally around his candidacy the federalist bloc and achieve his re-election, he would still have to face two challenges regarding his ultimate goal of solving the Cyprus problem. First, the different interpretation his bloc applies to the federal solution and second, Turkey's leading role at the negotiation table. Although the first question-challenge goes beyond this analysis, it is worth noting that just before the 'presidential elections', in the period following the failure of Crans Montana, the Turkish Cypriot leadership failed to convince the Greek Cypriot side regarding its interpretation of the issue of the political equality. At the end of 2019, it took the involvement of the UN Secretary-General which led to the Berlin agreement to address the impasse. Despite the new deal, the Greek Cypriot majority continue to be pessimistic for the future of Cyprus Issue. Besides, Ankara's support for the T/C partition bloc during the election period will be the second challenge Akıncı must face for re-election. In this case, the federalist bloc will be called upon to fight a historic battle on two separate 'fronts': that of the Greek Cypriot community and that of Ankara. Indeed, it is essential to remember that Ankaras' role in the occupied northern part of Cyprus has always been supreme. What is certain is that this battle will be very different and much tougher than the community 'elections' which follow.

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