

ELECTIONS IN AN ERA OF CRISIS

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There are many ways one might comment on the recent presidential elections in Cyprus. At the risk of being over-simplistic I have decided to highlight, in brief, what I consider to be the defining features of these elections and the challenges that lie ahead for the political and party system of Cyprus. However, it is first necessary to contextualize the elections, and in this regard, four parameters stand out.

First, we must recognise that the elections were held at a time of extreme economic uncertainty as the Eurozone economic crisis grows more intense every day. Moreover, many Cypriots feel increasingly alienated from a political system that must concede to EU demands for structural changes and thus often seems unable to protect them. However, it must be taken into account that the governments are increasingly deprived of tools to utilize, amidst continuous concession of sovereignty to the EU.

Second, in Cyprus today there is widespread disenchantment with, and profound distrust in, the major social and political institutions (especially political parties and politicians). This has led to a weakening of electoral alignments, increased political fragmentation and electoral volatility--unusual for the highly politicised Cypriot society. This can largely be attributed to Cyprus's EU membership. Since then, Cyprus has experienced a major transformation of its political and social milieu within a much shorter period than the rest of (western) Europe.

A third factor refers to the fact that for the first time in Cyprus the communist left headed the government, with its former party leader as President of the Republic. It was difficult for communist AKEL to govern an EU member state and preserve its radical identity, to balance its support for the government/the President and its own distinct identity. There were also much-inflated expectations that the party would solve both the Cyprus problem and internal affairs, making it difficult for the party to deliver its promises.

Finally, in Cyprus the executive is the most powerful institution in the country, which puts heavy pressure on presidential candidates. The power and status of the elected president in many ways, resemble those of a constitutional monarch

Given this context the major traits of these elections included:

1. The right-wing DISY, led by Nicos Anastasiades, returned to office after ten years of isolation. This was only made possible, however, by the party signing a deal with DIKO, a party that has participated

in almost all government coalitions since 1976 and a party DISY heavily criticised in former years for their policies especially with regard to the Cyprus problem.

2. The economic crisis sidelined discussions regarding the Cyprus problem for the first time in Cyprus's electoral history. Matters of the economy took precedence in the political agenda. There was greater concern over more personal matters relating to citizens' financial status. This created a condition where the certainties of the past no longer exist, leaving citizens unclear and insecure regarding both their own and their country's future course.
3. Traditional partisan loyalties continued to decline. This was most evident on four occasions. (a) The voting abstention rate climbed to 16.86% in the first round and 18.42% in the second round; albeit not very high per se, it was the highest in the history of presidential elections in Cyprus. It was also the first time that abstention rates were increased from the first to the second round of the elections. (b) G. Lillikas's sheer percentages (24.93%) almost tripled EDEK's power, the only party supporting his candidacy. (c) The internal strife in DIKO and EUROKO led DIKO supporters to turn their backs on their leadership who opted for Anastasiades, while EUROKO cadres were torn between Lillikas and Anastasiades. (d) For the first time AKEL faced considerable obstacles in rallying round its chosen candidate.
4. With regard to the three candidates, Anastasiades and Lillikas courted a wider and more varied audience than Malas, who focused primarily on AKEL supporters but failed to draw support beyond this pool especially in the first round. However, Malas had an enormous challenge given the steady demise of the Christofias presidency, in which he served as minister for a year.
5. The Greek Cypriot extreme right made a standing for the first time in presidential elections, claiming 0.88% (3899 votes). Their presence was more a statement of intent (with regard to the next parliamentary elections) than a substantive interest in the presidential elections per se.
6. An ideological shift to the right was evident in this campaign and was also reflected in the election results. This could perhaps be related to the first-ever occupancy of the executive by a left-wing president, which resulted in increased anti-communist and anti-leftist feelings among the population.
7. The role of the media was differentiated compared to other elections and therefore deserves notice. Despite asserting their non-bias, the majority of the media seemed to endorse a common strategy against the Left and for one particular candidate (Anastasiades).
8. The total failure of exit polls to forecast the result in the first round must also be noted. They all predicted a one-round election only to be falsified by the real results.

Party system: signs of reconstruction?

Many Cypriots believe that the political party stranglehold is coming to an end. Whether this is true, premature, or entirely false remains to be seen, especially in light of the pending EU Memorandum, which will likely act as an instigator of change. However, evidence of change is already visible.

On the left side of the ideological Rubicon, AKEL has become politically isolated for the first time in the post-1974 era. The party will need to address fundamental issues in the coming period and consider repositioning itself within the party system: e.g., issues relating to the party's ideological identity, its social and political alliances, etc. EDEK will try to capitalise on the inflated percentages of Lillikas's candidacy. However, this could fail if Lillikas decides to found his own party.

On the right, DIKO and EUROKO suffered significant intra-party tensions and the future of both parties remains vague. DIKO's leadership, in particular, faces increased pressure and will enter a period of intra-party turbulence with the party congress not very far away. However, their presence in government could act as a countervailing force. DISY's honeymoon will probably be very short given the dire economic situation of the country. DISY will also be involved in a major renewal of its leading bodies given the declared goal of its president to step down after the elections.

The new president will have to address highly significant and potentially divisive issues in the forthcoming weeks and months that will test his campaign rhetoric for unity and collectivity.