

Two Cheers for Christofias! Is the glass half full or half empty in post-election Cyprus?

CEPS Commentary/28 March 2008

Nathalie Tocci*

A ray of hope has flickered over the conflict-ridden island of Cyprus with the presidential elections in the Greek Cypriot south held on the 17th and the 24th of February 2008. And for good reason. Since the fateful referendum over the UN-brokered Annan Plan, the island has lived through stagnation at best and unrelenting deterioration at worst. With the partial exception of the low-key ‘Gambari process’ launched in 2006, the peace process has been shelved since April 2004. Yet this does not imply that trends on the ground have been frozen. As the Annan Plan became a fading memory, the prospects for reunification on the basis of a loose federal solution became increasingly dim. The upper hand has been taken by the two opposite ends of the spectrum of possible solutions: reunification into a unitary state, as desired by the Greek Cypriot side, and two de facto separate states or entities, as preferred or not opposed by the Turkish Cypriot side.

Against all odds, the Greek Cypriot public reversed the negative swing of the Cyprus pendulum with its vote on 17 February 2008. By relegating incumbent President Tassos Papadopolous to a humiliating third place in the presidential race, the Greek Cypriots signalled their will for change. In the first round, Papadopolous, with 31.8% of the vote, lagged behind AKEL candidate Demetrios Christofias at 33.3%, as well as the DISY candidate Yiannis Cassoulides at 33.5%. In the same way that Greek Cypriots had expressed their displeasure with former President Clerides’s flexibility in negotiations by voting for nationalist Papadopolous in 2003 and heeding his call for a resounding ‘no’ to the Annan Plan in 2004, they punished the stagnation generated by their president four years later. The Greek Cypriot public may indeed have sympathised with their incumbent leader’s words when he proudly declared that he delivered a “Republic of Cyprus as an equal member of the EU, with a robust economy, a fiscal surplus, with the euro as its currency...a Republic which is dignified and respected internationally, stronger than ever, to pursue and achieve the solution we deserve’. Yet as Papadopolous’ own words suggest, a stronger bargaining hand in 2008 compared to 2004 ought to be used to negotiate a better deal for the south and not to languish in complacency. And here is where Papadopolous fell short and lacked the confidence of his electorate, failing to present clear demands for a solution and thus signalling a fundamental disinterest in a UN-brokered bi-zonal and bi-communal federation. While the Greek Cypriots are certainly not drawn to a federal settlement, they are evidently not content with the status quo either, first and foremost because of the deep sense of insecurity it engenders in them.

Indeed the first two choices expressed by the Greek Cypriots on February 17th brought a ray of light to the beleaguered peace process. The right-wing DISY candidate Cassoulides, Foreign Minister under Clerides, had openly backed the Annan Plan in 2004 and criticised Papadopolous’ intransigence since then. Leftist AKEL candidate Christofias, despite his mild ‘no’ to the Annan Plan in 2004, had also

* Senior Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome and a CEPS Research Fellow. An earlier version of this commentary was published in the Turkish daily Zaman. CEPS Commentaries offer concise, policy-oriented insights into topical issues in European affairs. The views expressed are attributable only to the author in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which she is associated.

repeatedly pledged to break the impasse and re-launch negotiations. As many have noted in fact, while separated by the left-right divide, as far as a settlement is concerned AKEL and DISY are arguably closer to each other than to the centre-left yet nationalist DIKO.

In the second round, held on February 24th, Christofias predictably and comfortably won the race, ahead of Cassoulides with 53.4% of the vote. The victory has been acclaimed by Turkish Cypriot leader and President Mehmet Ali Talat, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband as well as the international press. Hopes are raised for a resumption of UN good offices, as hinted at in UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's latest report on Cyprus, which anticipated that 2008 would be "an important year" for the island. Christofias and Talat have already announced a forthcoming meeting, which is likely to see a joint request for a resumption of UN good offices. The history of amity and a good working relationship between Talat's CTP and Christofias' AKEL adds further expectations of a fruitful process, not least because the UN, having burnt its fingers with the Annan Plan, is unlikely to pursue an excessively hands-on mediation role in future, leaving instead the two leaders to make proposals and reach compromise. There is also scope for win-win improvements to be negotiated on an eventual repackaged and renamed Annan Plan-like agreement, including for example a more explicit link between Turkey's EU membership and the elimination of a foreign security role on the island. We can also expect some progress to be made on confidence-building measures (CBPs), with agreement on issues such as the opening of the Ledra street crossing along the green line in divided Nicosia. Further CBMs could include a possible freeze by the Republic of Cyprus of the law suits it has brought forward to the European Court of Justice against the Commission, disputing the legality of the Financial Aid regulation deploying aid to northern Cyprus as well as assisting the Turkish Cypriots in their de facto harmonisation with 12 chapters of the *acquis*.

Yet two cheers with a glass half full may suffice to celebrate Christofias' victory. First Papadopolous, while losing the presidential race, did so by a narrow margin of 8-9,000 votes, suggesting that over one-third of the public continues to back his nationalist and intransigent stance. Second and related, Christofias ultimately won the presidency because DIKO as well as the nationalist EDEK and Green Party backed his candidacy in the second round. In exchange for their support, these parties were assured a worthy recompense in terms of ministerial seats and negotiating approaches in the Cyprus problem. More specifically DIKO outlined no less than 18 principles to be followed by an AKEL-DIKO-EDEK-Green government in an eventually resumed peace process. Indeed DIKO and EDEK's choices were driven first and foremost by Christofias' more credible hardline credentials compared to Cassoulides, who instead had not firmly and publicly put the Annan Plan behind him. In supporting Christofias, DIKO declared it would act as 'guarantor' and 'regulator', maintaining the Republic of Cyprus on the 'correct course' and assuring that no agreement resembling the Annan Plan would be accepted. Finally, AKEL as a party and Christofias as its leader have lost much of their pro-solution credentials since the turn of the century and particularly with the Annan Plan debacle. While representing historically the warmest partners of the Turkish Cypriots, AKEL and Christofias are not necessarily the best bet for a solution. While in principle an ideologically driven "Communist" party, AKEL has demonstrated it can act in a highly pragmatic and at times opportunistic manner, engaging in unwieldy coalition politics with nationalist parties and rejecting the Annan Plan, arguably less out of conviction than out of interest not to be on the losing side of a referendum. As a matter of principle instead, Christofias may turn out to be no less of a hard nut to crack than his predecessor on issues such as demilitarisation, Turkey's guarantorship, refugees and the liberalisation of the freedoms of movement, settlement and property.

Beyond this note of caution on the Greek Cypriot elections, a further problem may lie on the other side of the green line and across the sea. The Turkish Cypriots today are disillusioned and sceptical compared to the heyday of the Annan Plan, when empowered by their overthrow of veteran leader Denktas they were willing to take a step into the unknown with the Annan Plan. That plan is no longer on the table and an eventual agreement is likely to be far more in line with Greek Cypriot desires. Moreover, the same kind of Turkish Cypriot enthusiasm for an Annan Plan-like agreement seems

unlikely after four years of almost constant disappointment with the Greek Cypriots and the international community's broken promises to lift the isolation of the north. The election of the new Greek Cypriot president and the break from stagnation should be warmly welcomed with two heartfelt cheers. But the third cheer may be best saved for the time when a Cyprus settlement may be closer on the horizon.