An unexplored case of political change: A research note on the electoral history of Cyprus

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This brief paper is no more than a research note aiming to offer some hints on the electoral history of Cyprus and the nature of sources of pertinent data that might be of interest to students of political change and political behaviour. Considered in a comparative framework this entirely unexplored material appears quite promising as a source for the study of political mobilization and political cleavages in the context of a changing society.

In the perspective of Cypriot history, these phenomena are characterized by particular complexity given the multidimensional nature of political conflict in an ethnically segmented society, highly vulnerable to external influences because of its geographic location and historical ties. Accordingly, political change as registered in electoral politics, has been the product of conflict on four distinct but interconnected levels: intracommunal social and political conflict; intercommunal antagonism escalating in violent ethnic conflict; native resistance to the foreign colonial regime whose establishment, however, inaugurated the process of modernization; and finally international conflict among external powers with interests in the strategically sensitive geopolitical space of the island. It is amidst all these interlocking pressures and tensions that the context of democratic government through electoral participation had to be fought. The systematic study of the relevant evidence therefore, could derive fruitful insights in connection with some central empirical, but also evaluative, concerns of political analysis.

Electoral politics before Independence, 1878-1960

The experience of Cyprus with electoral politics did not begin with the island's advent to independent statehood. Different forms of institutionalized popular participation in public affairs had been known since the beginning of British rule. The island's transfer from Ottoman to British administration in 1878 marked the establishment of formal ties that connected integrally traditional Cypriot society with modern Western practices. Among the latter was the introduction of popular suffrage by the new British rulers through the institution of a Legislative Council. A typical institution of British administrative practice in the colonial territories, the Legislative Council was in essence meant to be an agency for the legitimation of foreign rule through the semblance of consultation of the native population. It was composed of both elected native members and appointed members among the British officials of the colonial administration.

The mechanisms of operation of the Council were such that the elected members could never block the passage of official legislation because their majority vote could be overridden by decrees issued by the British High Commissioner or Governor. The Council, as established in 1882, was composed of six appointed official

2. See G.S. Georghallides, A Political and Administrative History of Cyprus 1918-1926 with a Survey of the Foundations of British Rule, Nicosia, Cyprus Research Centre, 1979, pp. 41-47.
British members, nine elected Greek members and three elected Muslim members. The twelve non-official members were elected on separate electoral lists for Greeks and Turks and this was one of the crucial policy measures that tended since the beginning of British rule to institutionalize ethnic distinctions in the island. The balance in the Council was such that the Muslim members could—and they usually did—block the promotion of legislation proposed by the elected majority by siding with the official members. However even when inter-ethnic cooperation in the Council could assure a majority vote for legislation proposed by the majority of the elected members, such legislation could—and was—annulled by executive orders-in-council.

For electoral purposes Cyprus was divided in three constituencies, each comprising two of the six normal administrative districts instituted by the British in the island. The suffrage was enjoyed by the great majority of the island's male population over the age of 21, specifically by all payers of some form of property or income tax. In 1925, under the constitutional changes introduced upon the declaration of Cyprus as a Crown Colony, the number of official members of the Legislative Council was increased from six to nine to counterbalance an increase in the number of Greek elected members from nine to twelve. Although this increase in the number of Greek members corresponded more faithfully to the numerical proportion of Greeks in the overall population of Cyprus (four fifths), the constitutional changes left the former balance of forces in the Council unaffected.

Despite the virtual annulment of the essence of representative government in the operation of the Legislative Council, its presence among the political institutions of Cyprus exposed the population for the first time to the experience of modern balloting.

Elections to the Council were held in 1883, 1886, 1888, 1889, 1890, 1891, 1896, 1901, 1904, 1905, 1906, 1911, 1916, 1925 and 1927.

The relevant statistical data which have remained in the archives of the colonial administration of Cyprus and have never been examined by scholarship concerned either with the political history of Cyprus or with electoral studies of any sort, constitute the most important source for a historical study of the forms and constraints of political mobilization in a rural and impoverished society. These initial forms of political participation were suppressed with the abolition of the Legislative Council by the British administration following the nationalist uprising in October 1931.

British rule also brought to Cyprus the institutions of local government with the popular election of municipal and communal councils. These elections too provided outlets for the contest of local political forces.

Municipal and communal elections over the years registered the initial outbreaks of dissatisfaction with British rule as reflected in the growth of the nationalist movement in favour of union with Greece. Despite the growth of Greek Cypriot nationalism however, the practice of local self-government which remained freer from the obstruction of official intervention, provided also opportunities for interethnic cooperation between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. This constitutes another significant aspect of the politics of Cyprus under British rule that deserves closer scrutiny.

In connection with the process of political mobilization in the history of Cyprus, the municipal elections provide perhaps the most important indicators in that they not only registered the strides of nationalism in the 1920s as observed so perceptively by Arnold Toynbee, but, following the repressive measures of the 1930s, the expansion of the leftist movement in the 1940s as well. In this regard the municipal elections of 1943, 1946 and 1949 are of particular interest for the study of political change.

The experience of modern electoral politics introduced in Cyprus by the institutions of colonial government was not the only form of the popular exercise of the suffrage in the history of the island. Another form of electoral experience more integrally connected with the traditional culture of the island has been the popular participation in episodic elections in the Greek Or...
thodox Church of Cyprus. An old tradition of the Christian Church, participation of the laity in the election of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, has survived to this day in the Church of Cyprus alone among all Orthodox Churches. The practice has been incorporated in the constitutional charter of the Church of Cyprus that was approved by the Holy Synod in 1914. The procedure involves indirect lay participation in episcopal elections in two stages: the male members of age 21 and over in each parish of the Church elect the so-called «special representatives» who in turn elect the «general representatives» of each diocese who along with the higher clergy compose the electoral assembly that elects the bishops by majority vote. This practice has been observed in every episcopal and archiepiscopal election in twentieth century Cyprus and constitutes one of the factors of the intimate involvement of the Church in the political life of the island. In certain circumstances the ecclesiastical elections were intensely politicized as it happened during the so-called «Archiepiscopal Question» of 1900-1910 and again with the archiepiscopal elections of 1946-47 which reflected the intense polarization of the politics of Cyprus between Left and Right.

II. Electoral Politics in the Republic of Cyprus

After a four year anticolonial revolt in 1955-59, Cyprus emerged as an independent republic within the British Commonwealth and the United Nations. The independence of the island and its constitutional status were settled by the Zürich Agreements concluded in February 1959 by the Prime Ministers of Greece and Turkey and were formalized later on that month in the London Agreements between Great Britain, Greece, Turkey and the official representatives of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. No plebiscite was held in Cyprus to consult popular opinion on the Agreements. This issue was contested in the first presidential elections held in December 1959 which produced a two third majority vote for Archbishop Makarios who stood in favor of the Agreements. The 1960 Cyprus Constitution provided for a presidential regime with a President elected directly by universal suffrage by all Greek Cypriots over 21 years of age and a Vice President elected separately in the same manner by all Turkish Cypriots. Legislative authority has been vested in a fifty member House of Representatives comprising thirty five Greek Cypriot and fifteen Turkish Cypriot deputies elected in six electoral constituencies coinciding with the six administrative districts of Cyprus with separate electoral lists for each ethnic community. The electoral system provided for universal suffrage of all citizens over 21 years of age, multimember constituencies and election based on simple majority or plurality of the popular vote polled by each candidate regardless of party affiliation. All elective offices in the executive and legislative branches are for five year tenure. The distinctive characteristic of electoral politics in the Republic was the institutionalization from the outset of the ethnic cleavage in the society. It thus precluded any form of political integration from developing in the context of democratic politics.

The operation of electoral politics in the republic was seriously obstructed by the constitutional crisis of 1963 and the ensuing ethnic violence and communal segregation. One important political consequence was the withdrawal of Turkish Cypriot officials from the government of the republic and from the legislature. Another technical consequence were the serious delays caused in holding elections in Cyprus. This explains the irregular intervals between electoral contests in the 1960s. Contested presidential elections were held in 1959 and 1968 with Archbishop Makarios winning both of them. In 1973 and 1978 the incumbent president was returned unopposed. General elections to the House of Representatives were held in 1960, 1970 and 1976. The 1960 election was settled by an electoral pact between the two major political formations, the nationalist Patriotic Front composed of followers of Archbishop Makarios and the leftist AKEL. It was contested at the polls by a few right wing supporters of union with Greece who however received a completely...
negligible share of the vote. The 1970 and 1976 elec­
toral contests reflected the differentiations undergone
meanwhile by the political sociology of independent
Cyprus, and were contested by five political parties in
each case. The one year delay in holding the 1976
parliamentary elections was due to a new major
upheaval in the history of contemporary Cyprus, the
Turkish invasion of 1974. 19 Local government elections
to the village communal councils were held in 1962 for
the first time since 1931 but their results were soon an­
nulled amidst the constitutional crisis of 1963. 20

Despite all these pressures, all electoral contests in
Cyprus have been remarkably free and orderly. Elec­
toral statistics pertaining to all these elections have been
officially published by the Public Information Office of
the Republic and were reproduced in the local press.
The statistics for the 1970 and 1976 elections, publish­
ed in several volumes, are particularly detailed. The
data are available on precinct and district level with
specific counts for each candidate as well as for party
lists. For parliamentary candidates both a personal and
a party count of the vote are available and this allows
very interesting comparisons which can yield important
insights into the political sociology and the character of
political mobilization in Cyprus.

Cypriot electoral data could be subjected to quan­
titative analysis in conjunction with the rich census
statistics collected annually by the Statistics and
Research Department of the Republic (demographic,
economic, social, educational and other indicators). Despite the interesting evidence that electoral studies of
this sort could produce for the comparative study of
political change, practically nothing has been done in
this direction by political scientists. The only exception
is a detailed study of the 1970 parliamentary election,
which attempted to examine the workings of demo­
cratic politics in the context of a society dominated by
networks of personal ties and obligations. 21 A similar
study of the 1976 parliamentary election is highly
desirable for comparative purposes in that it could ex­
amine the question of the impact of the trauma of the
1974 invasion on the character of political behaviour.
One partial explanation of the paucity of electoral
studies dealing with Cypriot politics, is the fact that the
domestic political life of the island, though fascinating
in its complexity, has been overshadowed by the inter­
national aspects of the Cyprus Question which has
received considerable attention by political historians
and students of international politics.

It is hoped nevertheless that this brief note on
Cypriot electoral politics will alert students of com­
parative politics to the research possibilities of an unex­
plored and quite promising case which can adduce new
evidence to the study of politics and social change in a
Mediterranean perspective.

19. The most informative source is Laurence Sterin. The Wrong
background, see Kyriakos C. Markides. The Rise and Fall of the
1977 which offers an account of the political sociology of the republic
referring also tangentially to the electoral contests of the period.
Blackwell. 1974. pp. 235-88 discusses the impact of this election on
the life of a rural community.