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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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1. Background

A two-round presidential election was held in Cyprus on 17 and 24 February 2008. The election was the first to take place after the country’s accession to the European Union and the abortive UN-planned referendum on reunification in 2004. It was also the first to be contested and won by a leader of the communist AKEL (Anorthotiko Komma Ergazomenou Laou, Progressive Party of Working People). The 2008 election took place in a highly politicized environment, in the midst of concern over the future of bicomunal negotiations. The 61-year-old Dimitris Christofias emerged as the winner, and efforts to reunify the island resumed after his election to the presidency.

According to the 1960 constitution of the Republic of Cyprus, the President is elected for a 5-year fixed term by members of the Greek Cypriot community.1 Following a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in the 2004 Aziz v. Cyprus case, electoral law was amended to enable Turkish Cypriots residing in the south to vote for the first time in presidential elections (Faustmann and Kaymak, 2007). The Republic of Cyprus follows a presidential system with Presidents enjoying more powers than, say, their French or American counterparts. To be elected, a candidate needs more than 50% of the votes. If no candidate meets that requirement in the first round, a run-off is held a week later between the leading two first-round candidates.

In February 2003, Tassos Papadopoulos won in the first round, gaining 51.5% of the vote after securing the support of a ‘tripartite alliance’ comprising AKEL, his own party DIKO (Demokratiko Komma, the Democratic Party), and EDEK (Eniea Demokratiki Enosis Kentrou, Unified Democratic Union of the Centre). AKEL remained in government until July 2007 when its ministers resigned from the Papadopoulos cabinet. The president remained in office: his constitutional independence from other branches of government meant that Papadopoulos simply had to replace AKEL ministers. However, while he remained in power until February 2008, the announcement in July 2007 of the candidacy of AKEL’s Dimitris Christofias marked the unofficial launch of the presidential campaign. Although invariably the largest party on the island, AKEL had never before contended the presidential elections directly, choosing instead to back presidential candidates outside its own constituency.

Elections in Cyprus take place in the shadow of recent history and contemporary developments related to reunification. The island is currently divided into two de facto sections: the Republic of Cyprus and the self-acclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). The Republic of Cyprus is run by the Greek Cypriots who control the southern part of the island. It is recognized by all countries...
except Turkey as the island’s legal government. Turkey recognizes only TRNC as an independent nation.

The 1960 constitutional provisions for power-sharing between a Greek President and a Turkish Vice-President lasted only three years after violent incidents involving members of the two communities. In July 1974, the military leaders ruling Greece – with the support of the Greek Cypriot paramilitary group EOKA-B – launched a coup against Makarios. In response, Turkey sent troops to Cyprus and occupied the northern part of the island. Representatives of the Greek and Turkish Cypriots and of Greece and Turkey have met several times since 1974 in an effort to reach new constitutional arrangements (Joseph, 1997). In April 2004, a referendum on the UN-endorsed ‘Annan Plan’ was held in both parts of the island. Approximately three quarters of the Greek Cypriot community in the south rejected it, while two-thirds of the Turkish-Cypriot community in the north endorsed it. By the time the Turkish side had agreed to a referendum on the Annan plan, the Republic of Cyprus had officially secured entry to the European Union and therefore the negative vote of the Greek Cypriots did not impede the accession process. Since 2004, little progress has been made in the Cyprus talks, and international sympathy has shifted towards Turkish-Cypriot positions. The stalemate dominated political debate during the 2008 electoral campaign.

2. Contenders and campaign

Before discussing the main contender candidates in the 2008 elections, it is useful to investigate the main political cleavages in the Greek Cypriot community (see Table 1). Apart from the left/right cleavage, Greek Cypriot parties are divided across at least four main cleavages shaped by the history of the island and attitudes towards reunification. Although divided by ideology, the two main parties AKEL and DISY share a moderate agenda on reunification. AKEL has been historically a political force supportive of compromise, however, in 2004 it voted together with its allies in the tripartite alliance against the Annan plan. AKEL, DIKO and EDEK share a history of conducting politics together under the leadership of the first President of the Republic of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios (1960–1977). DISY was the only party to support the Annan plan in 2004, a decision that divided the party and alienated part of its nationalist constituency later on to form EUROKO (Euro-paiko Komma, the European Party). DISY remains a party that emphasizes the Greek cultural heritage of Cyprus in contrast with AKEL which emphasizes the common Cypriot character of the two communities. DIKO and EDEK tend to align with DISY on this aspect. All parties with exception of AKEL tend to emphasize closer political, economic and cultural ties with the European Union.

The three main contenders in the 2008 presidential elections shaped their campaigns on these cleavages. The incumbent President, 74-year-old Tassos Papadopoulos, had spearheaded the Greek Cypriot rejection of the 2004 Annan Plan, and capitalized on that ‘no’ vote to promise that future negotiations would not be based on the defunct UN plan. He also emphasized the country’s economic performance during his presidency, and in particular the successful transition to the Euro-zone in January 2008. Papadopoulos secured support from DIKO, EDEK and EUROKO – the three parties representing the hardline approach to Greek Cypriot reunification politics – as well as other smaller parties. According to an independent website monitoring pre-election polls, every poll between June 2007 and February 2008 predicted that Papadopoulos would make it through to a second round of voting (Cyprus Elections & Politics, 2008; Christophorou, 2008).

Ioannis Kasoulides, 59-year-old former Minister of Foreign Affairs, was the DISY (Demokratikos Sinagermos, Democratic Rally) nominee for the presidency. Kasoulides emphasized his role in steering Cyprus towards European Union membership, and portrayed himself as a modernizer able both to restore Greek Cypriot credibility within the EU and to restart stalled reunification talks.

Dimitris Christofias, President of the House of Representatives since 2001, claimed to be more adept than his rivals at reaching out to Turkish Cypriots because of his long-held ties with the Turkish Cypriot left. Christofias denied the charge of being a Eurosceptic, and emphasized economic pragmatism, distancing his future administration from AKEL’s nominally communist ideology. Until July 2007, the party had supported Papadopoulos’s position on the Cyprus issue, although it also pushed for a more flexible agenda. By breaking the coalition at a time when incumbent Papadopoulos enjoyed significant support within

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Table 1
Electoral cleavages in Greek Cypriot politics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party/cleavage</th>
<th>Left/right</th>
<th>Unification attitude</th>
<th>Annan plan</th>
<th>Education/heritage</th>
<th>Makarios Legacy</th>
<th>2006 Vote share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AKEL</td>
<td>Communist</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Anti</td>
<td>Cypriotist</td>
<td>Pro</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISY</td>
<td>Centre-right</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Pro</td>
<td>Greek/European</td>
<td>Mainly anti</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIKO</td>
<td>Centre-right</td>
<td>Hardline</td>
<td>Strongly anti</td>
<td>Greek/European</td>
<td>Pro</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDEK</td>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>Hardline</td>
<td>Strongly anti</td>
<td>Greek/European</td>
<td>Pro</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUROKO</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Hardline</td>
<td>Strongly anti</td>
<td>Greek/European</td>
<td>Anti</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Since its establishment in 1976, DISY has included centre-right liberals supporting reunification and right-wing nationalists and former paramilitary groups who opposed Makarios in 1963–1974. Hardliners split off from the party and formed EUROKO after DISY officially supported the Annan plan.
AKEL, Christofias and his party took a major risk of losing voters to the incumbent president. The most notable feature of these elections was the close race among the three major candidates, each apparently representing around a third of the electorate. Although most polls showed Papadopoulos leading and predicted Kasoulides’ elimination in the first round, pollsters acknowledged that these differences fell within margins of statistical error (Cyprus Elections & Politics, 2008). Each candidate therefore had to devise a strategy to make it to the second round without alienating the losing side’s candidate and voters. The candidate eliminated in the first round would become kingmaker in the second round, a prospect that added an interesting dynamic to the campaign, as opponents competed simultaneously for first-round votes and second-round pacts.

With Papadopoulos more likely to make it to the second round, DISY and AKEL officials (particularly those from the former party) flirted with the idea of a left–right grand coalition. Such a coalition had never been envisioned: the parties had fought each other in all second-round elections since 1988, differing both in their ideological position and in their interpretation of history. In the past, AKEL had accused DISY of harbouring the paramilitary group EOKA-B which participated in the July 1974 coup against Archbishop Makarios. Yet on the national issue, there were no major differences between their two candidates. During the campaign, party leaders pointed to the upgrading of Turkish Cypriots and warned that the emergence of a state ‘like Taiwan’ in northern Cyprus was imminent. They also emphasized the unrestricted colonization of northern Cyprus by Turkish settlers – who, since the 2004 referendum, are close to outnumbering the Turkish Cypriots. DISY in particular warned that another Papadopoulos presidency would turn northern Cyprus into a Turkish province and that, under European law, Turkish-Cypriot refugees would eventually reclaim their old properties in the south. The Papadopoulos camp accused its opponents of not standing firm on the national issue and of flirting with the Annan Plan. However, by emphasizing the Cyprus issue, he campaigned on what was common ground for AKEL and DISY, thus unintentionally making a coalition between those parties more credible, and in turn gradually weakening his own incumbency advantage.

Apart from the Cyprus issue and the Annan plan, the rival camps also campaigned on a number of other issues (see also Christophorou, 2007). Kasoulides targeted younger voters promising to reduce the current mandatory military service for Greek Cypriot men from 25 months to 14. Christofias aimed for the poorer strata of the population promising better benefits for the needy and pensioners. Papadopoulos aimed at the refugee vote by putting forward a proposal to allow Greek Cypriot refugees to transfer their building co-efficients from the north to areas in the south currently controlled by the Republic. His plan was criticized as unfeasible and failed to mobilize refugee support. His administration was also criticized for a series of controversial decisions on the import of natural gas and for failing to safeguard water supplies even for daily household use.

DISY and AKEL also benefited from more effective party mechanisms. Youth associations in particular did much to mobilize support for the two parties’ candidates and helped to revitalize the campaign in the crucial final weeks before the election. Those parties were also particularly successful in bringing in tens of thousands of voters from abroad. In Cyprus, there is no voting by absentee ballot, and although the arrival of expatriates and students was welcomed by all major parties, smaller candidates made charges of “vote buying” by wealthy candidates and parties (Borowiec, 2008).

3. Results

At odds with the opinion poll predictions, and to his own apparent surprise, Papadopoulos was eliminated in the first round, gaining only 31.8% of the vote compared to 33.5% for Kasoulides and 33.3% for Christofias (see Table 2). After a week of deliberation with the three losing parties, Christofias won the support of EDEK and DIKO, while EUROKO remained neutral. Papadopoulos did not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate (party)</th>
<th>Round 1 (14 Feb)</th>
<th>Round 2 (24 Feb)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Votes</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimitris Christofias\a</td>
<td>150,016</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ioannis Kasoulides\b</td>
<td>150,996</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tassos Papadopoulos\c</td>
<td>143,249</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marios Matsakis</td>
<td>3460</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2918</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total valid votes</td>
<td>450,639</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalid votes</td>
<td>7798</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total votes cast/turnout</td>
<td>462,847</td>
<td>89.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered votes</td>
<td>516,441</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\a Christofias received support from AKEL in both rounds and from EDEK and DIKO in the second round.
\b Kasoulides received support from DISY in both rounds.
\c Papadopoulos received support from EDEK, DIKO and EUROKO in the first round.
take an official position in the second round, but his close associates had aligned with Christofias during the crucial deliberations within DIKO. Dimitris Christofias clearly benefited from this support from the losing parties, overturning the narrow first-round deficit and winning a clear (albeit still quite narrow) second-round victory, with 53.4% compared to 46.6% for Ioannis Kasoulides. The high turnout in both rounds, 89.6 in the first round and 90.8 in the second, can be largely explained by mandatory voting, although may have been boosted by the closeness of the race as demonstrated in the polls.

In the second round, the Kasoulides camp emphasized educational and heritage issues, openly accusing AKEL of undermining the Greek and Greek Orthodox heritage of the island. Identity has been a feature of all Cypriot elections, with DISY centre-right supporters asserting that “Cyprus is Greek” and AKEL supporters responding that “Cyprus belongs to its people”. DISY also accused AKEL of Euroscepticism, emphasizing its own connections with European parties in power. However, these arguments proved weaker than the alliance between AKEL and its former allies in the Papadopoulos camp dating back to the 1960s.

The UN referendum seems to have had little effect on the 2008 presidential elections, with Papadopoulos failing to capitalize on the resounding ‘no’ vote of 2004. Exit polls showed that Papadopoulos had the support of only 40% of the ‘no’ camp and 5% of the ‘yes’ camp. The corresponding percentages for Kasoulides were 24% and 62%. Christofias received substantial backing from both camps, winning the first-round support of 35% of ‘no’ voters and 32% of ‘yes’ voters (Konstantinides, 2008). The results of the elections clarified the preferences of the Greek Cypriot community and indicated the likely direction of future negotiations. Importantly, over 65% of the Greek Cypriot electorate supported pro-solution candidates. Thus, the electoral performance of Christofias and Kasoulides boosted the confidence of the pro-unification camp in its ability to achieve a federal settlement with the Turkish Cypriots.

4. Aftermath

In the first months of his presidency, Christofias appointed DIKO and EDEK party members to his cabinet and convinced opposition DISY to re-enter the National Council, the main consultative body on the national issue. Marios Garoyian, current President of DIKO, was elected to replace Christofias as President of the House of Representatives. Garoyian, an Armenian-Cypriot, is the first member of a minority to be elected to this post. A moderate among hardliners, Garoyian, is expected to play a balancing role against forces in DIKO who oppose Christofias’s policies in the negotiations. On 21 March Christofias met with Turkish-Cypriot leader, Mehmet Ali Talat, and agreed to resume preparations for negotiations in technical committees and working groups. A couple of months later, on 23 May, the two leaders made a joint declaration agreeing on a “partnership with a federal government a single international personality, as well as a Turkish-Cypriot constituent state and a Greek Cypriot constituent state of equal status” (UNFICYP, 2008). While the opposition DISY offered its support for the joint declaration, there was strong opposition expressed by DIKO and EDEK party leaders, along with former President Papadopoulos. Nevertheless, public opinion polls remained strongly in favour of Christofias who appears determined to move the peace process forward. Christofias and Talat resumed direct substantive negotiations on 3 September 2008 under UN auspices.

References