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ELECTIONS IN NORTHERN CYPRUS: A REFERENDUM FOR SETTLEMENT?

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“Turkey in Focus” is a new service initiated by TUSIAD Washington Office that provides update on issues related to Turkey on a monthly basis.

Turkish Cypriots are going to polls on December 14, 2003. Several factors make the upcoming event unique in Turkish Cypriot history. First, Cyprus is about to join the EU in May 2004, regardless of whether Turkish and Greek Cypriots reach an agreement by this deadline. Second, the Cyprus negotiations based on the U.N. plan, also known as the Annan Plan, which collapsed in March 2003, are unlikely to resume unless there is a change of attitude especially on the Turkish Cypriot side. Third, for the first time, opposition parties in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) pose a serious challenge to the parties in power, namely the Denktas-aligned National Unity Party (UBP), led by current Prime Minister Dervis Eroglu, and the Democratic Party (DP), led by TRNC President Rauf Denktas’s son Serdar Denktas.

❖ Who Is The Turkish Cypriot Opposition? Where Does It Stand?

An Alliance of Three Parties: The main Turkish Cypriot opposition involves a coalition of three parties, also known as the “United Forces”: the Republican Turkish Party (CTP) led by former TRNC Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Ali Talat; the Peace and Democracy Movement (BDH), led by former mayor of Nicosia, Mustafa Akinci; and the Solution and E.U. Party (CABP), led by Ali Erel, who also heads the Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce. Opposition parties formed an alliance against TRNC President Rauf Denktas, and agreed on September 4, 2003 not to form coalitions with other parties following the December 14 polls. Their attempt to sideline the incumbent Turkish Cypriot leader requires winning a parliamentary majority of 26 seats out of a total of 50.

A Unified Cyprus Based on Annan Plan: Opposition parties promise to establish a unified Cyprus based on the Annan plan, provided that it ensures political equality of Turkish and Greek Cypriots. They want northern Cyprus to join the south before its entry into the EU, by reaching an agreement as of May 2004, so that the Turkish Cypriots would benefit from the EU membership. They also suggest holding a referendum on final settlement, previously initiated by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan’s plan.

Denktas, No More; Papadopoulos Not Sincere: The United Forces vociferously express their intentions to remove Denktas as the chief negotiator for the Turkish Cypriot side and appoint a new person, who would have a more progressive and conciliatory stance on reaching a solution. In their public statements, the opposition leaders also try to keep their distance from the Greek Cypriot leader Tassos Papadopoulos. They similarly question his sincerity and intentions about reaching an agreement on the basis of the Annan plan.

Turkey-TRNC Relations Are Unhealthy: The alliance is highly critical of the “unhealthy nature” of TRNC-Turkey relations. They call for a redefinition of bilateral ties, which would be based on equality and sovereignty so that neither country would have the right to intervene in each other’s internal politics. They argue that Turkey’s paternalistic relationship with the island and its “redeemer” status since 1974 have allowed the “big brother” to have upper hand on Turkish Cypriot affairs.

United Cyprus’s EU Membership Benefits Both Turkey and TRNC: According to the opposition leaders, the accession of a united Cyprus into the EU is in the common interests of both Turkey and Turkish Cypriots. Turkish Cypriot opposition criticizes the EU for its mistreatment of Turkey and argues that the Union should start sending clear signals to Turkey regarding the start of accession talks, and should include the Turkish language among the official EU languages.

❖ **Turkey’s Stance: Will AKP Make A Difference?**

No Determined Justice and Development Party (AKP) Policy on Cyprus: Ever since coming to office, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s policy on Cyprus has been full of swings. Erdogan’s early remarks have been much more assuring to the outside world that he would be pushing for a settlement in Cyprus one way or another. In his early days in office, he stated that the AKP was neither supporting a view in line with the hardliners who have been defending a "no settlement is a settlement" policy, nor pursuing a defeatist “sellout” policy. He reiterated the strong will of his party to bring about an end to the almost four-decade-old problem in the island. Erdogan also praised the revised UN plan during negotiations as a well thought out and balanced initiative.

Yet, facing an internal pressure from the military and civilian hardliners, he backed away from a possible confrontation with Ankara, adopting more or less the traditional stance and rhetoric. The Premier, in March 2003, criticized the U.N. document stating that it amounted to Turkey "giving up Cyprus." Similarly, during his November 15 visit to the island on the occasion of TRNC’s 20th anniversary, Erdogan ruled out a settlement “at any price” and reiterated strong support for Denktas and a two state solution.

Who Supports Denktas? Denktas continues to enjoy unconditional support by the Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, the foreign ministry and the military. The Turkish President and foreign ministry officials consistently praised Denktas’s determination to protect the rights, equality and sovereignty of the Turkish Cypriot people. Meanwhile, Chief of Staff Hilmi Ozkok, in a November 10, 2003 interview with Turkish daily Radikal, reiterated the strategic importance of the island for Turkey.

Alternative Proposals To Annan Plan: What dilutes AKP’s commitment to Annan Plan is the fact that Ankara and Denktas are reportedly working on several alternative initiatives, including one based on the Belgian model. Ankara and Denktas have come up with several new proposals since

the collapse of U.N. brokered negotiations, including opening borders with the South, opening air and seaports to Greek Cypriot traffic, and giving back part of the abandoned city of Famagusta in return for the reopening of the island's former international airport.

❖ **Greek Cypriot Stance: Does Papadopoulos Support The Annan Plan?**

Papadopoulos, Too, Has Objections To Annan Plan: The proposition that Denktas is the only obstacle before reaching a settlement based on the Annan Plan is misleading. Although the Greek Cypriot leader Papadopoulos agreed to consider the plan as basis for negotiations, unlike Denktas, he frequently raised objections to certain items in the plan. To some extent, Papadopoulos was elected, replacing veteran Greek Cypriot leader Glafcos Clerides, because of his anti-settlement rhetoric. He was backed by voters, who say the Annan plan grants too many concessions to Turkish Cypriots. Papadopoulos frequently asked for a revised plan, which would more clearly define the powers of the central government, called for an agreement on "security issues", and insisted on the return of all Greek Cypriots to their pre-1974 properties. In a speech in August 2003, Greek Cypriot leader contended, "the overwhelming majority of the people of Cyprus do not accept the Annan plan as it stands." A settlement-seeking Turkish Cypriot stance would put the ball in Papadopoulos's court to prove his genuineness about a long-term solution prior to the May 2004 deadline.

❖ **Foreign Stance: Has The International Community Given Up On Denktas?**

While the outcome of the historic race is still a mystery, the international actors involved in settlement efforts in Cyprus, mainly the UN, EU, and US, have made statements in favor of the opposition.

The UN: Blame Is On Denktas: While avoiding any blatant finger pointing during the U.N. brokered talks, Secretary General Kofi Annan publicly declared, after the initiative collapsed, that Denktas bore the prime responsibility as he declined to "engage in negotiation on the basis of give and take, greatly complicating efforts to accommodate the practical interests of the Turkish Cypriots." The U.N. Secretary-General also made clear that he does not intend to take a new initiative to revive talks based on his plan, unless he is given solid reason to believe that the political will exists necessary for a successful outcome.

The US: Elections Should Be Transparent: The US authorities recently stated that the US considered elections to be a referendum on the Annan plan. Recognizing the importance of these elections for reaching a lasting settlement between Turkish and Greek Cypriots, Washington expressed concerns about the fairness and transparency of the election process and expressed interest in having independent observers to monitor the elections. US Cyprus Coordinator Thomas Weston reportedly promised that a more intense effort to solve the Cyprus issue would begin after the December 14 polls.

The EU: Elections Are A Window Of Opportunity: EU officials have publicly expressed their distaste for Denktas and placed their hopes on the opposition parties. For example, European Commissioner for Enlargement Guenther Verheugen and European Parliament President Pat Cox received the United Forces on November 18, 2003 and commented there was a "window of opportunity" for peace talks right after Turkish Cypriot parliamentary elections on December 14. Hanjoerg Kretschmer, European Commission Representative in Turkey, recently noted if the opposition parties were to prevail, this would pave the way for a resolution in the island.

Pushing Turkey To Solve Cyprus Issue: Turkey is under grave pressure to resolve the Cyprus deadlock prior to May 2004. Ankara received a word of warning by the European Commission's progress report, released on November 4, 2003, that a lack of a solution by next year could become a "serious obstacle" for its own membership. Although, the link has been uttered by a number of EU officials over the months, the latest progress report was the first official comment from the Commission.

❖ **What To Expect From December 14 Elections?**

Opinion Polls Indicate A Blurry Picture: Opinion polls vary in their findings. A mid-October poll conducted by Verso polling agency, suggested that despite their declining popularity, the two ruling parties still enjoyed considerable support. According to the Verso survey, the National Unity Party of incumbent Prime Minister Dervis Eroglu could lose about half of the vote it received in the 1998 polls, but still come first with 26.2 percent. The survey also suggests that 16.7 percent would back Eroglu's coalition partner, the Democrat Party of Serdar Denktas. On the other hand, the main opposition actor, Mehmet Ali Talat's Republican Turkish Party, could nearly double its support and gather 24.1 percent of the vote. Two other opposition parties would receive some 11 percent of the vote. 12 percent of the survey respondents were undecided.

What Do Demonstrations Tell? The Turkish Cypriot administration frequently dismisses suggestions that the opposition has a chance of securing a parliamentary majority. The opposition on the other hand is confident that the majority of Turkish Cypriots will be seeking fresh blood. The Annan plan also drew wide support from Turkish Cypriots. After the U.N-initiated talks fell through, the biggest demonstration in Turkish Cypriot history took place with 70,000 people on the streets, almost one third of the Turkish Cypriot population, in favor of the plan. In fact the movement against Denktas has been building some time, ignited by the financial crisis of the summer of 2000. Coupled with the international isolation and economic embargo, the crisis devastated the Turkish Cypriot economy.

Giving Away Citizenship In Return For Vote? The international community and opposition accuse the pro-Denktas administration of granting a large number of Turkish nationals citizenship in a bid to affect the election outcome. The Council of Europe estimates that there are about 115,000 Turkish settlers in TRNC, outnumbering the 87,000 Turkish Cypriots. Even if the allegations are true, whether these newly naturalized Turkish settlers would necessarily vote for Denktas is not certain. There are arguments that some of these settlers might be lured by the benefits of the EU membership and give up their traditional allegiance to Denktas for opposition parties. However, considering that a majority of Turkish nationals have generally supported Denktas's hardline stance, such a possibility seems rather slim.

❖ **The Way Forward**

The international community sees the December 14 Turkish Cypriot elections as the final hope for a lasting settlement in the island. It is hard to predict the elections outcome based on contradictory survey figures, but many analysts agree that the vote of the Turkish settlers will be a key determinant. In any event, the elections will be a turning point in Turkish Cypriot history, as they might dramatically change the negotiating stance of the Turkish Cypriots in a Cyprus settlement and their chance for EU membership. It will also play a vital role in the future direction of Turkey's own relations with the EU.

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