Cyprus

History

Cyprus was occupied by the British from 1878 while still under Ottoman sovereignty, as it was a strategic asset against the Tsar's European ambitions. It was annexed to Britain during the First World War when the United Kingdom and the Ottomans were on opposing sides. It then received independence from Britain in 1960. In 1960, Cyprus, Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom entered into an 'Act of Guarantee' to protect the basic provisions of the Constitution and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Cyprus.

In 1974, the attempt to overthrow the elected-president in Cyprus led to a Turkish Invasion under the terms of the 1960 Act of Guarantee. The Turkish forces took control of about a third of the island. A ceasefire was declared on 16 August 1974, but no peace agreement was reached. Turkish Cypriots thereafter proclaimed self-rule on 13 February 1975, and independence in 1983. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is the name given by Turkish Cypriots to the Turkish-administered part of Cyprus. However, it is only recognised as independent by Turkey.

In the absence of a permanent political settlement to the Cyprus problem,the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) has remained on the island to supervise ceasefire lines, maintain a buffer zone, undertake humanitarian activities and support the good offices mission of the Secretary-General.

Cyprus joined the EU in May 2004. However, its membership only applies to the internationally recognised Government of Cyprus, which comprises the southern two thirds of the island. Cyprus has used the Euro since 2008.

Archbishop Vaneziz Makarios (Greek Orthodox), a veteran of the anti-colonial movement, took office as the first President. Communal violence later led to a de facto separation of communities by 1963. A UN peace-keeping force of more than 1,000 personnel was thereafter deployed in 1964. This remains the longest standing UN force today.

Demographics

Population: 1.2million on the Island; 250,000 live in the Capital, Nicosia.

Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia remain British Overseas Territories on the island of Cyprus.

According to an October 2011 census by the government of the Republic of Cyprus, the population of the government-controlled area is more than 858,000. Moreover, 89 percent of the population in the government-controlled area is Greek Orthodox Christian and 1.8 percent is Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Protestants, Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, and Buddhists. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, and Buddhist. Most of the approximately 2,300 Jews are foreign-born residents

According to census information released in 2013 by the Turkish Cypriot authorities, which contains no data on religious affiliation, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots, the TRNC is 286,257. It is estimated that 98 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. An estimated 10,000 to 12,000 immigrant workers of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin are Alevi Muslims, and there are also small numbers of followers of other schools of Islam. Other small groups include members of the autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, Russian Orthodox Church, Bahais, Maronite Catholics, Anglicans, Jews, Turkish-speaking Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Meanwhile, a small number of African students who are predominantly Pentecostals and Roman Catholics also reside in the area.

Source: http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dynamic_load_id=238368&year=2014#wrapper

Key Religious Leaders

Major leaders include Archbishop Chrysostomos II, and Grand Mufti Dr. Talip Atalay, the Maronite Archbishop, the Armenian Archbishop, and the Patriarchal Latin Vicar.

Political Affairs

Since 2013, the Head of State, who is also Chief of Government, has been President Nicos Anastasiadies (Democratic Rally Party, DISY). Cabinet is the council of ministers appointed by the president.

Legislature

There is a unicameral House of Representatives with 80 seats (56 for Greek Cypriots and 24 for Turkish Cypriots) in government-controlled areas. Only 56 seats are filled. Meanwhile, the Maronites (Levantine Catholics), Armenians, and Latins (Roman Catholics) elect special non-voting representatives.

The President is required to be a Greek Cypriot, elected by the Greek Cypriots population, and the Vice President a Turkish Cypriot, elected by the Turkish Cypriots population.

The Cabinet is to include seven Greek Cypriots, chosen by the President, and three Turkish Cypriots, chosen by the Vice President.

A unicameral Assembly of the Republic with 50 seats exists in the TRNC. The TRNC has its own constitution, elections and courts.

Political Parties

There are three main parties in the government administered area: DISY – Christian democratic and centre right party, AKEL – communist, and DIKO – centre right party.

There are three main parties in TRNC: Republican Turkish Party-United Forces or CTP-BG – centre left, National Unity Party or UBP – centre right party, and the Democrat Party – National Forces or DP-UG.

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and Human Rights

According to Freedom House, freedom of religion in Cyprus is guaranteed by the Constitution and protected in practice. Nearly all inhabitants of the south are Orthodox Christians; discrimination against members of other religions has been alleged in the south. For example, it is reported that state schools use textbooks containing negative language about Turkish Cypriots and Turkey.

A 1975 agreement with Greek Cypriot authorities and the TRNC constitution provide for freedom of worship in TRNC. Although TRNC is considered a secular state, the religious activities of non-Muslims are subject to some regulations, and there are still disputes over the condition of Christian churches and access to religious sites. For example, according to Freedom House, in May 2014, police broke up a service at a Maronite church due to the fact that the worshippers, some of whom were from the Republic of Cyprus, lacked permission from the TRNC foreign ministry to hold a service.

Source: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/northern-cyprus

Improvements since 2009

 Cyprus has had religious tensions for decades. In the Muslim-dominated north, a number of Christian churches and monasteries — many hundreds of years old — deteriorated following abandonment and looting. Some reports suggest that only a handful of mosques still operate in the Christian-dominated south.

But the situation improved in 2009. This is mainly due to faith-based diplomacy between the leader of the island's Greek Orthodox Christian Church Archbishop Chrysostomos II and Turkish Cypriot Muslim Grand Mufti Talip Atalay.

Source: http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/595549/religion-builds-bridges-in-ethnically-split-cyprus

Although the religious and political context is inextricably linked, there may be lessons to be learnt from Cyprus regarding the involvement of religious leaders in peace processes. This could be particularly relevant in the context of areas where there are FoRB violations that are causing unrest and communal tension. Also there may be much to be learnt if there are similar issues across the Commonwealth on access to religious places of worship.