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The Exploitation of the Pandemic by the Republic of Cyprus: An Update (Delirium) (Online Article)

Historical Note

This online article was published in February of 2021 on the blog 'Cypriot Footnotes' and was signed with the pseudonym Delirium.

Content

The Exploitation of the Pandemic by the Republic of Cyprus: An Update

In November of 2020 I published an article on this blog attempting to offer a summary of the various ways through which the government of the Republic of Cyprus has taken advantage of the covid-19 pandemic, advancing a set of authoritarian policies under the pretext of protecting public health. The article is available in Greek, as well as in English. The present article was originally intended to act as a sort of appendix to that first article, in order to offer a small update on the developments since then. During its writing, however, this aim was quickly overstepped both in tone and content, leading to a rather uneven article that also discusses some political developments. For the purposes of clarity, I have attempted to keep these two sections separate, as the discussion of politics naturally exceeds mere documentation and is therefore more subjective in character.

I apologize in advance for the rather hectic writing that follows below, which at times loses its pacing, occasionally changes its tone rather rapidly and in some instances expresses uncompromising positions without detailed argumentation. This piece was written over several hours in a single day; during a lockdown that has admittedly been taking its toll on my mental capabilities. It has thus acted primarily as a form of mental catharsis, in contrast to the original article, the writing of which gave emphasis on a carefully articulated set of arguments, passing through a detailed editing process. There is currently no plan to translate the present article in Greek. The reproduction, translation and distribution of this article, as well as of the original November article, are happily encouraged.



The Troubling Developments since November, 2020

The Cypriot government introduced a series of contradictory measures in November, which could have been designed to promote the spread of covid-19 rather than restrain it. Such measures included an essential ban on accessing open-air public spaces by imposing a limit of two people interacting with each other on the precondition of wearing masks; regardless if they were socially distancing or not [2], while keeping malls, stores, cafés, churches, bars and restaurants open. In parallel, the government imposed a night curfew between 21:00 and 5:00, with most shops having to close at 19:00 [1]. This rather obvious attempt to accelerate the local economy by reducing people's options to staying at home, going to work, shopping and going to a bar, restaurant or a café for socialization resulted in overcrowded cafés, malls and stores, a predictable development given the imposition of a curfew that reduces an individual's free time to a handful of hours. Keeping squares, parks and camping sites empty while looking the other way at the overcrowding of privately-owned open and closed spaces unsurprisingly did not reduce the spread of the virus and if it accomplished anything at all, it probably accelerated it. With cases and hospitalizations rising rapidly, the government was eventually forced to take some sort of action. A partial closure of schools was introduced in December, while the hospitality industry, malls and other shopping centres were told to shut their doors, with the remaining stores kept open for that wonderful holiday shopping spree [3]. Protests being also banned since November, these last few months of 2020 saw yet another set of arrests of individuals who dared to share a protest event on social media, regardless if they actually attended it or not [4].

The arrival of 2021 saw the introduction of a second lockdown, which came as a surprise to no one, since leaked information documenting what measures might be enforced became a regular aspect of our newsfeeds. Taking force from January 10, this second lockdown was meant to last until the 31st and had nothing to be jealous of from the lockdown of 2020, save that this time airports were allowed

to operate under the already existing restrictions [5]. As has been the case in every set of government measures, this lockdown has also been characterized by blatant contradictions, epidemiologically questionable decisions, preferential treatment for specific groups at the expense of others (such as religious believers and hunters); and the all too usual employment of collective punishment when the police fail to successfully enforce the decrees. We will not thus delve into a detailed cataloguing of this all too depressive situation, but rather focus on those measures that have added something new to our emerging dystopia, with the first notable one touching the nerves of some lawyers.

As part of the lockdown measures the government decided to impose restrictions on the functioning of courts, including which court cases are to be allowed to proceed and which to freeze, in parallel restricting the presence of employees in courts and lawyer offices [5, 6]. The implications of these declarations did not escape the attention of the Cyprus Bar Association, which protested that this was a direct violation of the constitutional right to a fair trial and a direct and unprecedented intervention of the executive branch of government to the independent functioning of the judiciary [6]. The reaction of the Bar Association has of course not led to an amendment of the decree, which still remains in force, violating any sense of a separation of powers, resulting in the case being taken to the courts [7]. And while we are waiting for the trial, the executive continues to uphold a decree violating the independence of one of the three branches of government, undermining a fundamental prerequisite for the maintenance of a functioning representative democracy.

A development that passed almost unnoticed was the publication of a decree by the Ministry of Health on the 12th of January; declaring that all final year nursing university students of private and public universities are obliged to staff public hospitals from the 18th of January to the 17th of February, without specifying any pay. In a language familiar to anyone who has ever received a drafting letter from the National Guard, the decree stipulated that students would have to present themselves to “the office of the Head Nursing Officer of the General Hospital [of their] Province, at 7.15 am wearing [their] uniforms”; and that they would “work in a shift system for 6 days a week” [8]. Leaving aside the obvious fact that nursing students are already burdened with working at private hospitals alongside their studies, the decree is an unprecedented imposition of forced labour (paid or unpaid) by the state, with the Ministry appointing to itself the power of selecting which sub-category of workers can be turned into forced labourers; for the purpose of maintaining the functioning of state mechanisms. It is also worth reminding ourselves that no state of emergency has been declared in Cyprus. With the exception of a letter sent to the ministry by nursing students, the decree was met with the usual, unsettling silence.

At the end of January the government introduced the first phase of easing the lockdown, announcing that some restrictions would be lifted in February. Despite the self-congratulatory statements of a government declaring that we are exiting the lockdown, the lifting of restrictions merely amounts to an opening up of shopping alongside a number of other services, while keeping the SMS system, the curfew, the banning of protesting and the banning of accessing open-air public spaces intact [9]. The decree has however not merely outlined the lifting of restrictions, but also announced the introduction of mandatory testing for workers on a weekly basis as a prerequisite for going back to work, with workers expected to get tested for free at the various rapid-test sites stationed by the government throughout the island [10]. Failure to do so will result in a 300 euro fine, payable by the worker, with the government warning that regular checks will be taking place in working spaces, expecting workers and businesses to be able to present the relevant documentation [11]. Despite the questionable legality of forcing a medical practice on the general population through the threat of prosecution and financial loss, the decree has been met with no institutional resistance, save for the occasional outrage of isolated lawyers [12]. This is not, of course, a new practice, but a generalization

of a previously enforced policy. Mandatory testing has been a requirement for crossing the buffer zone checkpoints for almost a year, with people crossing from the south to the north having to present a negative test result to Greek Cypriot police, a measure that was also forced upon people travelling to Pafos and Limassol during the local lockdowns of 2020, most of which were workers trying to get to their work spaces. The decision of the government to forcefully impose regular testing on the majority of the population has opened a new terrain of potential violations, as the integrity and sovereignty over our bodies is now directly open to question.

Yet another development that has passed unnoticed is the cancelling of local elections at Liopetri via decree in the middle of January, with the decision for a new election date assigned to the Minister of Interior [15]. The Ministry of Health has apparently claimed the power to decide when elections are safe to take place and when they are not, providing an interesting precedent for the democratic functioning of our little state.

A note should here be made on the introduction of the appointment system for vaccinations, which functions on a first come, first served basis, for a pre-defined set of vulnerable groups. Rather than allowing for the general registration of those interested in receiving the vaccine, followed by the evaluation of the received demand in relation to vulnerability and capacity, scheduling appointments accordingly, the ministry decided to regularly open and close access to registration depending on available appointment slots [13], forcing personal doctors and family members to compete with each other in the process of digitally registering their elderly patients and loved ones every time the ministry decides to opens up access, resulting in slots disappearing in as little as half an hour [14]. The system may appear as a bizarre failure in public administration, but it is perhaps worth noting that rather than paying for the additional labour necessary in setting up a flexible, coherent and organized appointment system, the current arrangement forces personal doctors and family members into performing unpaid labour for the Ministry of Health, as the responsibility of assigning the elderly and other vulnerable groups to appointment slots has quietly passed from the state to the general population, following the same logic of personal ‘initiative’ and ‘responsibility’ that has permeated government discourse from the beginning of the pandemic in Cyprus.

The Lack of any Meaningful Opposition

From the partial closure of buffer zone checkpoints in February of 2020 to the cancelling of local elections in January of 2021, the government has effectively drawn its powers from a forgotten colonial law providing the Minister of Health with the authority to publish legally binding decrees after the declaration of a pathogen as an ‘infectious disease’. The limit to these powers in relation to constitutional rights, as well as the legality (or not) of the colonial law itself have occasionally been addressed in public discourse during the past year by a series of online and newspaper articles, mostly written by lawyers. Nonetheless, there has been no effective challenge to the decrees published and implemented by the government, leaving the state to announce increasingly authoritarian, contradictory and psychologically exhausting measures on the pretext of protecting public health, eroding piece by piece fundamental constitutional rights as well as the democratic character of the polity. One of the many results has been the evaporation of any remaining public trust in the handling of the pandemic, with conspiratorial thinking of one form or another skyrocketing, from the disbelief in the existence of the virus itself and the ridiculous claims that vaccines will alter our DNA and/or introduce microchips into our bodies, to the more traditional conspiratorial mindset dominant in Cyprus, ranging from downplaying the severity of covid-19; to claiming unspecified ‘hidden interests’ behind the measures, unable to distinguish between standard medical advice for the containment of the pandemic and measures taken merely on the pretext of doing so.

Decisions continue to be taken behind closed doors with no accountability, no transparency and no co-ordination with broader civil society, announced and enforced from the top-down in an increasingly militarized structure, logic and language in which the Minister of Health acts as the head commander, with the rest of the population expected to perform the role of drafted soldiers, executing whatever orders the minister decides to give in any given day. The inclusion of an epidemiological committee merely adds the necessary scientific justification to a series of authoritarian policies decided upon by the council of ministers; and which have not been seen in most liberal democratic states. That no member of the epidemiological committee has directly contradicted or publicly opposed some of the most extreme measures, such as bans on accessing open-air public spaces while maintaining access to malls and other private venues, the confinement of asylum seekers to crowded and abysmal living conditions, or the preferential treatment of the church and other politically influential institutions at the expense of the rest of society; cannot be merely excused on the 'advisory' character of the committee, as these decisions are publicly legitimized through its supposed scientific input. The committee has also come to function unintentionally as a sort of useful scapegoat, absorbing some of the anger of small business owners and workers who see their livelihood evaporating while the government engages in political theatre, announcing economic support schemes offering pitiful amounts, entangled in a web of bureaucratic hell.

That the present government has utilized the public health crisis to enforce measures and policies which have nothing to do with the containment of covid-19 should by now be no surprise to anyone who has been closely paying attention. Surrounded by the worst corruption scandal in living memory, a seemingly never-ending series of additional scandals and public outcries and the continuous accusation (and indication) of following a policy of partition on the Cyprus Problem, there is absolutely no reason to expect any sense of political decency or legality from the current administration. What is perhaps both surprising and increasingly worrying is the extent to which the political opposition has been willing to accommodate the government's claim to rule by decree, allowing it to enforce whatever it pleases effectively unchallenged.

An early indication of the opposition's unwillingness to claim a more critical stance was the rejection of holding early parliamentary elections in October of 2020 following the Cyprus Papers scandal, with AKEL and DIKO voting against the proposal tabled by the Greens and independent MP Anna Theologou, claiming that calling for early parliamentary elections deflects the responsibility of the government from public discussion; requesting the resignation of the president instead [16]. Maintaining the existing balance of power in the parliament secured after all the position of the Speaker of the House in the hands of the leading parties of the opposition, following the resignation of Demetris Syllouris due to his involvement in the scandal. As new, increasingly authoritarian decrees came into effect in November, including another total ban on protests, MP Anna Theologou submitted a bill aiming to amend the colonial law by transferring the authority of publishing decrees from the Minister of Health to the parliament [17].

Whether such an arrangement would have worked effectively is open to question. Nonetheless, this proposed amendment has been the only example, so far, of a member of the political opposition attempting to effectively challenge the government's increasing authoritarianism. Had it passed, it would had introduced an active regulatory role for the parliament, allowing it to review, debate and amend existing and future decrees, introducing for the first time some level of scrutinization and accountability in the decision-making process surrounding the handling of the pandemic. The proposal was not allowed to proceed to a vote on grounds of urgency; and was instead sent by the parliament (with the support of AKEL) for review to the internal parliamentary committees in early December [18]. This was an obvious strategic move, condemning the amendment to remain in bureaucratic limbo, stack on a long pile of legislation awaiting a never-ending series of reviews and internal

discussions, killing in this way the proposal without having to vote against it. This has not apparently stopped AKEL, as well as other parties, from hypocritically issuing statement after statement on the unconstitutionality, authoritarianism and politically repressive character of the decrees [19, 20, 21, 22], at the same time as they actively blocked the only meaningful attempt made to deprive the government from the power allowing it to rule the country by decree.

Despite occasional public announcements against specific elements included in the ever-accumulating ministerial decrees, parliamentary oversight over the governmental handling of the pandemic has been essentially abandoned by the legislature, with the political opposition showing no interest in scrutinizing the executive or limiting the damage caused by the government's authoritarian policies. What we are witnessing is nothing less than the ongoing disintegration of political rights at the hands of the executive, the slow erosion of the independent functioning of the judiciary; and the complete disregard of the legislature in keeping the government accountable over the exploitation, as well as the handling of the pandemic. Meanwhile, hospitals remain understaffed, concentration camps continue to be in place, checkpoints remain closed and workers are left largely unpaid and unsupported, under the oversight of a state that is increasingly resembling an authoritarian regime rather than a democratic republic. The institutions are of course there, but the democratic reflexes are not.

Delirium

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Last update: **2021/02/08 11:30**