

Democracy Practices in De Facto States: A TRNC Perspective *De Facto Devletlerde Demokrasi Uygulamaları: KKTC Perspektifi* Ramazan Safa^{1*}

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Öz

Bu çalışma, geniş çapta uluslararası tanınırlığa sahip olmayan de facto devletlerdeki demokratik uygulamaları, Kuzey Kıbrıs Türk Cumhuriyeti (KKTC) örneği üzerinden incelemektedir. De facto devletler, sınırlı diplomatik statülerine rağmen siyasi kurumlarını oluşturmakta ve yönetim sistemlerini inşa etmektedir. KKTC, tarihi gelişimi, egemenlik tartışmaları ve Türkiye ile olan özel ilişkileri nedeniyle bu bağlamda dikkat çekici bir örnek teşkil etmektedir. Araştırma, demokrasi kavramını KKTC'nin kurumsal yapısı, seçim sistemi, vatandaş katılımı ve dış etkenlerin rolü üzerinden değerlendirmektedir. Çalışmada, demokratik normların ne ölçüde korunduğu veya zorluklarla karşı karşıya olduğu analiz edilmiştir. KKTC'nin yarı-başkanlık ve parlamenter sistem unsurlarını içeren hibrit yönetim modeli, çalışmanın temel inceleme alanlarından biridir. Anayasal çerçeve, yasama-yürütme-yargı arasındaki güç dengesi ve demokratik hesap verebilirlik mekanizmaları detaylı bir şekilde ele alınmıştır. Özellikle yürütme organının gücü ve yargının bağımsızlığı, demokratikleşme süreci açısından kritik unsurlar olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Seçim süreçleri ve seçim sistemindeki reformlar, KKTC'deki siyasi temsiliyet açısından büyük önem taşımaktadır. Orantılı temsil esasına dayalı D'Hondt sistemi, parti dinamikleri ve seçmen davranışları üzerindeki etkileri bağlamında analiz edilmiştir. Genel olarak seçimlerin demokratik ilkelere uygun şekilde gerçekleştirildiği görülsede düşük seçim katılımı ve dış müdahale iddiaları siyasi özerklik konusunda endişeler yaratmaktadır. Vatandaş katılımı ve siyasi kurumlara duyulan güven, demokratik yönetişimin sürdürülebilirliği açısından belirleyici unsurlardır. Araştırma, seçmen davranışları, sivil toplum katılımı ve siyasi aktivizm gibi konulara odaklanarak KKTC halkının demokrasiye bakış açısını değerlendirmiştir. Bulgular, özellikle genç seçmenler arasında seçime katılım oranlarının düştüğünü ve siyasi sisteme duyulan güvenin azaldığını göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, sivil toplum kuruluşlarının şeffaflık ve hesap verebilirlik konusunda önemli bir rol oynadığı tespit edilmiştir. KKTC'nin Türkiye'ye olan ekonomik ve siyasi bağımlılığı, demokratik yönetişim açısından en önemli meydan okumalar arasında yer almaktadır. Türkiye'nin sağladığı ekonomik destek ve siyasi nüfuzu, yerel yönetim kararları ve seçim süreçleri üzerinde etkili olabilmektedir. Bu durum, KKTC'nin demokratik süreçlerinde bağımsızlık ve dış müdahale konularında çeşitli tartışmalara yol açmaktadır. Çalışma, bu bağımlılığın KKTC'nin demokratik gelişimi üzerindeki uzun vadeli etkilerini değerlendirmekte ve uluslararası meşruiyet arayışlarını tartışmaktadır. Bu araştırma, KKTC özelinde demokrasi ile de facto devlet statüsü arasındaki ilişkiyi ele alarak, uluslararası siyaset ve yönetim literatürüne katkı sağlamaktadır. Tanınmayan devletlerin demokratik uygulamaları sürdürme çabalarını ve karşılaştıkları engelleri ortaya koyarak, demokratikleşme süreçlerine dair daha geniş bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır. KKTC'nin yaşadığı deneyimler, tanınmamış devletlerin yönetim yapıları ve demokratik reformları konusunda önemli dersler içermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: De facto devletler, demokrasi, KKTC, yönetişim, egemenlik, siyasi katılım.

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Abstract

This paper examines the intricate dynamics of democratic practices within de facto states, with a specific focus on the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). De facto states, which operate without widespread international recognition, face unique challenges and opportunities in establishing and maintaining democratic governance. Through an in-depth exploration of TRNC's political landscape, including its historical evolution, institutional framework, electoral mechanisms, and citizen participation, this study aims to illuminate the complexities of democracy in contexts marked by contested sovereignty. Drawing on a multidisciplinary approach, the research utilizes primary sources, scholarly literature, and comparative analyses to assess the adherence to democratic norms in the TRNC. Key factors such as sovereignty disputes, external influences, and socio-political dynamics are scrutinized to understand how this shapes the democratic processes within the TRNC. Special attention is given to the role of core institutions, including parliament and judiciary, in steering the state's democratic trajectory. This study also highlights critical issues related to minority rights, civil liberties, and political pluralism, all of which are essential to the functioning of democracy. The study further explores the perceptions of TRNC citizens regarding democracy, offering insights into their levels of political engagement, trust in institutions, and aspirations for the future. By delving into the lived experiences of citizens, the research sheds light on the broader societal implications of democratic governance in the TRNC. It evaluates how public sentiment is influenced by external pressures, such as the significant role played by Türkiye in the TRNC's political and economic spheres, and internal factors, including electoral reforms and governance challenges. The TRNC's democratic framework is analyzed within the context of its hybrid government system, which combines elements of parliamentary and semi-presidential models. The paper details the constitutional and institutional structures that underpin the TRNC's political system, including the distribution of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. These structures are critical in understanding the democratic resilience and adaptability of a state operating under international ambiguity. This research also considers the broader implications of de facto statehood on democratic practices, contributing to ongoing discussions in international relations and political science. It addresses the ways in which de facto states like the TRNC strive to demonstrate democratic legitimacy to bolster claims of sovereignty, often adopting reforms to align with international democratic standards. By providing a comprehensive case study of the TRNC, the paper offers valuable insights into the intersection of governance, sovereignty, and democracy. It underscores the challenges faced by de facto states in fostering democratic norms while navigating the constraints imposed by limited recognition and external dependencies. Ultimately, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how democracy can be practiced and sustained in contexts where statehood itself is contested, offering lessons for broader applications in international governance and conflict resolution.

Keywords: Political Science, De facto states, Democracy, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Governance, Sovereignty, International recognition

Introduction

The exploration of democratic practices in de facto states, entities with limited or no international recognition, is critical for understanding governance and sovereignty in contested regions. This paper focuses on the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), a de facto state that declared independence in 1983 following a complex history of conflict and political strife. Despite its legal recognition, the TRNC has established its own political institutions and democratic processes, making it a compelling case study for examining the dynamics of democracy under such unique conditions.

TRNC's journey from its historical roots to its current political state provides a rich backdrop for this study. The island of Cyprus, conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1571, came under British colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. Independence was gained in 1960, but intercommunal violence soon disrupted the power-sharing republic. The 1974 Greek military-backed coup aimed at achieving Enosis (union with Greece) prompted Türkiye to intervene militarily, leading to the island's division. In 1975, the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus (TFSC) was established as a transitional administration. This later led to the unilateral declaration of independence in 1983, forming the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), which remains recognized only by Türkiye.

This paper delves into the TRNC's government system, which exhibits characteristics of both parliamentary and semi-presidential systems. It explores the roles and powers of the president, the assembly, and the judiciary, as well as the administrative structure. Despite its contested status, the TRNC integrates democratic principles into its governance model. Electoral processes and democratic challenges are examined to provide insights into how elections are conducted and the obstacles to achieving a fully democratic system. The study reviews the evolution of the TRNC's election system, including significant changes and their implications for political representation and voter engagement.

The methodology involves comprehensive analysis using primary sources, scholarly literature, and comparative studies. This multi-faceted approach allows for a thorough examination of the TRNC's political landscape, assessing both institutional structures and citizen perspectives.

This research aims to uncover the complexities of democratic practices in the TRNC, evaluate the effectiveness of its political institutions, and understand citizen engagement and perceptions of democracy. These objectives contribute to a deeper understanding of how de facto states navigate the challenges of limited recognition while striving to uphold democratic norms.

The significance of studying the TRNC lies in its potential to inform broader discussions on governance and statehood in de facto states. The findings offer valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of democratic practices under conditions of international ambiguity. Additionally, the research sheds light on the implications of external influences, such as Türkiye's role in the TRNC, on the sovereignty and democratic development of such states.

In conclusion, this paper provides a detailed exploration of democratic governance in the TRNC, contributing to the broader field of international relations and political science. By examining the institutional and electoral aspects of the TRNC alongside citizen perspectives, the study presents a comprehensive overview of the challenges and prospects for democracy in de facto states.

Institutional Framework

The TRNC, declared on November 15, 1983, continues to exist as a state that has not yet gained broad international recognition. There is no clear consensus on what the government system of the TRNC is. The former

Speaker of the TRNC Assembly, İsmail Bozkurt, described the political structure of the TRNC as a "pure parliamentary system where the President is directly elected by the people" (Bozkurt, 2013). However, a report prepared by the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Türkiye (TEPAV) states that the TRNC is governed by a semi-presidential system (TEPAV, 2013). A similar view was expressed in the 2011 book by Tufan Erhürman, who would later serve as the Prime Minister of the TRNC (Erhürman, 2011).

According to Article 4 of the TRNC Constitution, "The legislative power belongs to the Assembly of the Republic on behalf of the people of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus." The Assembly of the Republic consists of 50 members, elected for five-year terms. The fourth part of the TRNC Constitution is titled "Executive" (KKTC, 1985). This section regulates the duties and powers of the President and the Council of Ministers. The fact that the executive branch has two heads, namely the President and the Council of Ministers, shows parallels with the semi-presidential system of the TRNC's government system (Ustabulut, 2020). The President of the TRNC is elected by the people for a five-year term, and the election is held in two rounds. If no candidate achieves an absolute majority in the first round, the two candidates with the most votes compete in the second round, and the candidate with the most votes is elected President (KKTC, 1985). The method of electing the President alone is not sufficient to determine the government system, as the President can also be elected by the people in parliamentary systems. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the powers and duties of the President to determine the government system of the TRNC.

Article 102 of the TRNC Constitution regulates the powers and duties of the President. The President, as the head of state, represents the unity and integrity of both the state and society. His duties are ensuring the regular conduct of the constitution and public affairs. Article 101 of the Constitution states that the Presidency and party leadership cannot be combined in the same person, indicating that a partisan presidency is not allowed (KKTC, 1985). Additionally, there is no restriction on how many times a person can be elected President. This allows a person to be elected President multiple times, strengthening the President's position (TEPAV, 2013). Although the President does not have political responsibility, he can be charged with "treason" and, in such a case, can be removed from office by the Assembly of the Republic. The President also has the authority to dissolve the Assembly of the Republic in situations where the Council of Ministers cannot be formed (Ustabulut, 2020). This authority is an important element that strengthens the President's position within the executive branch and supports the argument that the TRNC's government system is a semi-presidential system (Erhürman, 2011).

A semi-presidential system is characterized by the strong powers and influence of the President within the executive branch. These powers held by the President indicate that the system implemented in the TRNC is different from a classical parliamentary system. Article 146 of the Constitution gives the President the authority to refer a law to the Constitutional Court for an opinion, further reinforcing the President's active role within the executive branch (KKTC, 1985). In the TRNC, the President also holds the role of negotiator in resolving the Cyprus conflict and carries out the task of managing foreign relations. These two duties of the President do not stem from the Constitution but from conventions, which position the President in a very strong role (TEPAV, 2013).

The legislative body is responsible for making laws, approving the budget, and overseeing the executive branch (KKTC, 1985). These responsibilities are fundamental elements of a democratic system. The relationships between the legislative and executive branches in the TRNC indicate that the government system is semi-presidential. The legislative body's authority to oversee the executive emerges as a necessity of a democratic

governance approach. The judiciary in TRNC is independent, the highest judicial authority is the Supreme Court (Dolunay & Kasap, 2020). The Supreme Court has the authority to make decisions in cases inconsistent with the Constitution. The Supreme Court functions as the Constitutional Court, the Court of Cassation, the Council of State, and, if necessary, the High Court. Additionally, it handles criminal cases and other legal disputes.

The administrative structure of the TRNC is divided into six districts: Lefkoşa, Gazimağusa, Girne, Güzelyurt, İskele, and Lefke (Kyrıs, 2013). Each district is headed by a governor appointed by the central government. Public services are organized by ministries responsible for various sectors such as education, health, transportation, and finance, and are overseen by the Council of Ministers. The political landscape of the TRNC includes several parties such as the National Unity Party (Ulusal Birlik Partisi - UBP), the Republican Turkish Party (Cumhuriyetçi Türk Partisi - CTP), the Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti - DP), and the People's Party (Halkın Partisi - HP) (Ulusoy, 2016). These parties represent a broad ideological spectrum and provide an environment where different political views compete. The UBP advocates for strong ties with Türkiye and a two-state solution, while the CTP supports reunification and a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation. The DP occupies the center-right, and the HP emphasizes good governance and anti-corruption (Özgür et al., 2017).

The lack of international recognition of the TRNC hinders the establishment of extensive diplomatic relations (Isachenko, 2008). This situation creates challenges for economic development and international legitimacy. The TRNC maintains its representation internationally through representative offices in various countries, but these offices do not have the status of official embassies or consulates. These limitations restrict the TRNC's access to international trade and aid, making economic independence difficult. The political and economic dependence of the TRNC on Türkiye plays a significant role in shaping internal policies and decisions (Tosun et al., 2020). This dependence can sometimes bring the autonomy of democratic processes into question. Türkiye's influence can be decisive in the TRNC's internal and external policies, which can limit the strength of the country's democratic institutions and practices. While judicial independence is generally maintained, concerns about political interference occasionally arise. This situation poses a significant challenge to the democratic development and economic sustainability of the TRNC.

In conclusion, the government system of the TRNC includes elements similar to both parliamentary and semi-presidential systems. The strong powers and influence of the President within the executive branch led to the characterization of the TRNC's government system as a semi-presidential system. However, the relationships between the legislative and executive branches and the legislative oversight of the executive demonstrate that the TRNC has a democratic governance approach. The challenges regarding international recognition and economic independence can affect the development of democratic processes and institutions.

Electoral Processes and Democratic Challenges

The TRNC's election system, based on the 1976 Election and Referendum Law, uses proportional representation with the d'Hondt method and a 5% threshold for parliamentary representation (Bozkurt, 2013). Recent changes have introduced more flexible voting options, allowing voters to cast ballots for individual candidates or mixed-party preferences. Elections in the TRNC are held in a way that each voter fills a large number of seats determined by population size (Erhürman, 2011). This means that parties will elect MPs based on their vote share. A total of 50 deputies are elected across the country, and these deputies come from six different regions: Nicosia is represented by 16 deputies, Famagusta 13, Kyrenia 10, Guzelyurt 4, Lefke 2 and Iskele 5 deputies

(Bozkurt, 2013). While the D'Hondt method allocates the number of MPs according to the party's vote share, it generally directs voters to vote for a party or ideology.

Significant changes were made to the electoral system in 2017. With the new regulations, voters can cast their votes in different ways (Bozkurt, 2013). Voters can vote for only one party by using a sealed ballot. They can also vote for specific candidates in addition to stamping their party seal with seal plus preference. The mixed voting system allows voters to vote for candidates of different parties (Raftery et al., 2021). While this regulation provides more flexibility to voters, the complexity of preference and mixed voting procedures has been criticized. With the new system, TRNC has become a single electoral district. This means that all voters can vote for all candidates, and voters can choose not only among candidates in their district but also candidates across the country (Duba, 2022). However, this system also has some difficulties and criticisms. Voters may not know the candidates in all regions and therefore may have difficulty in expressing their preferences. The single-region system has partially reduced regionalism; However, preferential voting remains complex.

The 2013, 2018 and 2022 general elections in TRNC allowed an in-depth understanding of the political and social dynamics of the island. Like every parliamentary election held in the TRNC, the general elections held on July 28, 2013 were held according to the 5% election threshold and the D'Hondt system throughout the country. Before the election, the Supreme Electoral Board (YSK) decided to elect 16 deputies from Nicosia district, 13 from Famagusta, 10 from Kyrenia, 6 from Güzelyurt, and 5 from İskele to the Republic Assembly consisting of 50 deputies. In this way, second thresholds or constituency thresholds ranging between 6.25% and 20% were applied, depending on the number of deputies to be elected from the districts (Supreme Electoral Council of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, n.d.). Five parties participated in the election: United Cyprus Party (BKP), Republican Turkish Party United Forces (CTP/BG), Democratic Party National Forces (DP/UG), Communal Democracy Party (TDP) and National Unity Party (UBP). Additionally, seven independent candidates competed. The turnout rate in the elections was 69.4%. The district with the highest participation rate was Güzelyurt with 75.8%, followed by İskele with 75.3%, Famagusta with 69.7% and Kyrenia with 66.9%. The district with the lowest participation is Nicosia with 66.3%. According to the election results, CTP emerged as the first party in the election, winning 21 out of a total of 50 deputies with a vote rate of 38.3% across the country. UBP won 14 deputies with 27.3% of the votes, DP/UG won 12 deputies with 23.1% of the votes, and TDP won 3 deputies with 7.1% of the votes. BKP, on the other hand, could not enter the Parliament with 4.5% of the votes. For the first time in history, CTP came first in all districts, with 41.7% in Nicosia; 36.1% in Famagusta; 37.4% in Kyrenia; 37.6% in Güzelyurt; and in İskele, it had 32.2% of the votes. UBP was the second party in all districts except İskele (Supreme Electoral Council of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, n.d.). Since no party could obtain the majority to form a government alone in the early general elections, a CTP/BG and DP/UG Coalition Government was established (Kıbrıs Postası, 2013). During this period, the congress fights within the UBP were punished by the public, and a shift in votes to other right-wing parties was observed. This emphasizes the political consciousness of the TRNC people and their influence on the elections.

The 2018 general elections marked an important moment in the democratic process in the TRNC. In these elections, important issues such as the participation of various political parties and the formation of a coalition government came to the fore. Voter turnout in the 2018 elections was 66.1%, indicating a high level of participation in the political process (Supreme Electoral Council of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, n.d.). TRNC is divided into certain electoral districts for its Parliament consisting of 50 deputies. The distribution of MPs in the

2018 elections was as follows: Nicosia 16, Famagusta 13, Kyrenia 10, İskele 5, Güzelyurt 4 and Lefke 2 MPs. A total of eight parties participated in the elections, and six of them passed the 5% threshold and were entitled to enter the Parliament. The National Unity Party (UBP) became the first party by winning 21 deputies with 35.5% of the votes, followed by the Republican Turkish Party (CTP) with 12 deputies with 20.9% of the votes, the People's Party (HP) with 9 deputies and 17.0% of the votes. Communal Democracy Party (TDP) followed with 3 deputies with 8.4% of the votes. The Democratic Party (DP) and the Rebirth Party (YDP) also managed to gain 2 seats each (Supreme Electoral Council of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, n.d.). Since no party could secure a majority on its own, coalition negotiations were held after the election. Since UBP, which received the most support, could not find a partner that would give it a majority in the parliament, a 4-party coalition government was established with the cooperation of CTP, HP, DP and TDP (Altınar, 2018). This situation revealed the necessity of a multi-party structure and political compromise in TRNC. The existence of a multi-party structure in the Parliament reflects the diversity of TRNC policies and the inclusiveness of decision-making processes. Election results play an important role in addressing economic and social issues affecting developments in the region and in managing relations with Türkiye. The 2018 general elections were an important indicator of competitive multi-party politics and coalition governments in the TRNC. These elections reflect various factors and social dynamics that shape the democratic structure and political processes of the TRNC.

The January 23, 2022 elections in TRNC were a turning point that pointed to important changes in the political landscape in the country. The center-right UBP emerged as the first party in the elections with 39.6% of the votes and 24 deputies (Supreme Electoral Council of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, n.d.). After the election, UBP leader Faiz Sucuoğlu stated that they aimed to establish a strong executive government with the support of the people (Bianet, 2022). The centre-left CTP ranked second, winning 18 seats with 31.9% of the votes. After the election, CTP leader Tufan Erhürman gave the message that they would make a harsh opposition (Kanlı, 2022). Among other parties, HP was able to win only 3 seats with a lower than expected vote rate (6.6%) and suffered a major defeat. YDP, on the other hand, gained 2 seats with 6.4% of the votes. Social Democracy Party (TDP), Socialist Liberation Party (TKP) and Independence Path (BY) could not pass the election threshold and enter the Parliament. The January 23, 2022 elections in TRNC were significantly influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to a low voter turnout of 58%. Concerns about Covid-19 transmission and voting restrictions likely contributed to this reduced participation (Kanlı, 2022). Moreover, widespread pre-election boycott calls by parties and non-governmental organizations further dampened voter engagement, reflecting widespread discontent with the electoral process (Kanlı, 2022). These factors notably impacted the election outcomes, highlighting a pronounced polarization between the right bloc, represented by UBP, and the left bloc, represented by CTP. This polarization underscores the evolving political landscape in TRNC.

The various dynamics and developments presented by the 2013, 2018 and 2022 general elections in TRNC in terms of democratic principles allow an in-depth understanding of the political and social structure of the island. The 2013 elections can be considered a significant political turning point in TRNC. These elections increased competition among political parties and reinforced democratic legitimacy with the high election participation rate. CTP's emergence as the first party in all districts and the subsequent establishment of the CTP/BG and DP/UG coalition demonstrated an important example of political compromise. The 2018 elections showed that multi-party politics in TRNC has deepened, and coalition governments have gained importance. UBP's emergence as the first party with 35.5% of the votes, but the failure of its efforts to form a government

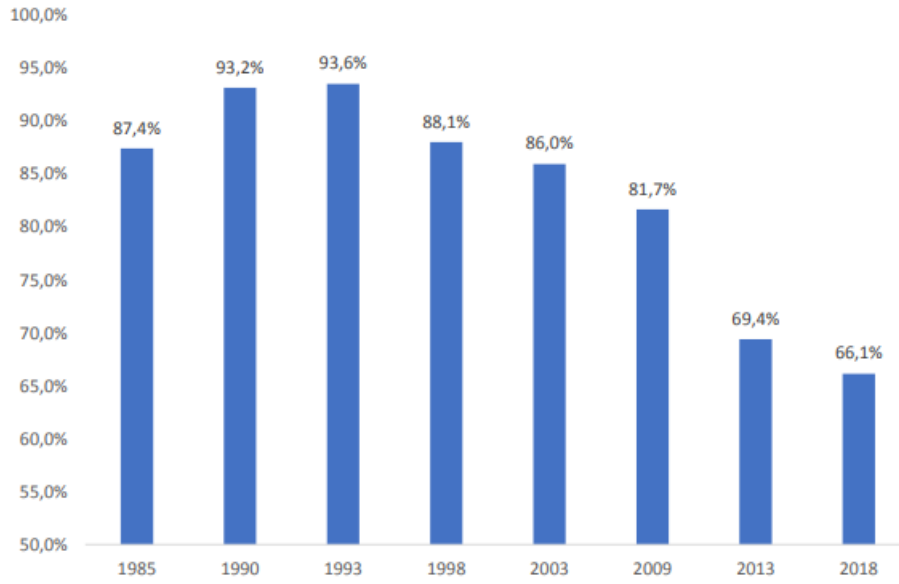
alone and the formation of a four-party coalition is a result of political compromise and diversity. These elections emphasized the democratic maturity and polyphonic political structure of the TRNC. The 2022 elections have shown the effects of political polarization and low voter participation in the TRNC. These elections, which took place with a 58% participation rate due to pandemic conditions and boycott calls, ensured that UBP emerged as the first party with 39.6% of the votes and CTP remained in second place with 31.9% of the votes. These elections clarified the political dynamics between the right and left blocs. Each election period represents important milestones in the democratic development of the island.

The 2020 Presidential election caused controversy in the political arena with the claim that it was an election that moved away from democratic principles. The winner of the elections was Ersin Tatar, the candidate of the National Unity Party (UBP), who received 51.69% of the valid votes and took office as the fifth President of the TRNC. Independent candidate Mustafa Akıncı completed the election with 48.31% of the votes. The participation rate in the election was 67.29%. The 2020 Presidential election process and results have aroused various repercussions in the country and international platforms. However, various claims have been made about the victory of Ersin Tatar, who was openly supported by Ankara throughout the election process. Many groups claimed that Türkiye intervened in the elections, and a report was prepared by the opposition group on these allegations. The report claimed that Ankara took various steps to support Tatar and made efforts to gain an advantage over Akıncı. The report details various events related to Türkiye's interventions in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus since 2019: Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu held public meetings in rural areas such as Karpaz without informing the then President Mustafa Akıncı (September 9, 2019), Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan invited Ersin Tatar and Kudret Özersay to Türkiye. There are important events such as holding a meeting closed to the press (January 10, 2020), Çavuşoğlu using harsh expressions against Akıncı and clearly stating the candidate he supports (February 11, 2020) (Yücel et. al., 2021). In addition, Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay and UBP candidate Ersin Tatar held a meeting in Maraş under the name of 'Closed Maraş Initiative' and Akıncı was not invited to this meeting (February 15, 2020) (Yücel et. al., 2021). These developments attracted the attention of international observers and led to discussions about the impartiality and transparency of the election process.

Citizen Participation and Political Engagement

The political participation levels of TRNC citizens are measured by various indicators. One of the most obvious indicators of political participation is the participation rate in elections (Pebriyenni et al., 2020). The election participation rate, which was 93.6% in 1985, dropped to 66.1% in 2018. In the 2022 general elections, this rate dropped to the lowest level in history with 58% (Supreme Electoral Council of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, n.d.). This decline may indicate a decrease in citizens' interest in politics or a weakening of their trust in the political system. In general, political participation in the TRNC was initially high and decreased over time. As participation rate in elections has decreased since 1993, and it can be said that this situation is directly related to the trust of Turkish Cypriots in politics.

Table 1: Voter turnout rates in the TRNC



While democracy is generally viewed positively, there are mixed feelings about trust in political institutions in TRNC. It can be said that some citizens have doubts about the effectiveness of political parties and state institutions (Kanol & Köprülü, 2017). It is seen that in periods when the participation rate in elections is high, the efforts of political parties and candidates to appeal to the public are effective, but this interest decreases over time. It can be said that interest in politics among the young population is low. Young people's participation in politics is of critical importance for the sustainability and future of democracy (Weiss, 2020). Research conducted in TRNC shows that there has been a significant decrease in the political participation levels of young people over the years. Evre's study, conducted in 2007 and 2016 on two different cohort groups aged 15 and 18, revealed that there was a significant decrease in the political participation levels and some forms of participation of young people. A significant decrease has been observed in forms of participation, especially the intention to vote and carrying the symbol of a political party (Evre, 2020). The findings obtained in the study also reveal that young people's voting intentions differ according to age and gender variables. It has been determined that 18-year-old youth have higher voting intentions compared to 15-year-old youth (Evre, 2020). This shows that the participation rates in elections probably will keep decreasing.

There are various factors affecting citizen participation in TRNC. These factors include education level, economic situation, social environment, and political awareness. It can be said that individuals with higher education levels are more interested in political participation (Henn & Foard, 2013). Education makes it easier for individuals to understand and participate in political processes. Individuals who are economically better off are more likely to participate politically. Citizens experiencing economic difficulties generally show less interest in politics (Weiss, 2020). Social factors such as family, friends, and work environments can directly influence individuals' political participation (Henn & Foard, 2013). Individuals in environments where political discussions are intense may be more active. Individuals with a high level of political awareness generally play a more active role in political participation. This awareness requires knowledge about political events and processes. Making political institutions more transparent and accountable will increase citizens' trust.

It can be argued that Türkiye's political and economic influence on the TRNC may negatively affect voting behavior and that concerns about independence and local political will may increase among voters (Ulusoy,

2016). Türkiye's political and economic influence in TRNC is decisive in shaping local policies (Tosun et al., 2020). Türkiye's political and economic influence in the TRNC may be decisive in shaping local policies. TRNC's political leaders and parties can adjust their policies in line with Türkiye's interests to gain and maintain Türkiye's support. This situation increases voters' concerns about Türkiye's direct intervention in TRNC domestic politics, which undermines voters' trust in the political process.

As a result, political participation in the TRNC has decreased over the years, reflecting a decline in public trust and interest in politics. This trend is influenced by various factors, such as socio-economic conditions and broad political relations with Türkiye. Increasing transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in governance can regain citizens' trust and increase political participation.

Challenges to Democratic Governance

In recent years, scholarly research has increasingly focused on the internal dynamics of unrecognized states. A key area of interest is how non-recognition affects the quality of democracy in these states. A consensus among scholars suggests that non-recognition does not necessarily obstruct democratization; some argue it might even promote it. For instance, Caspersen (2012) and Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2012) posit that non-recognition can act as a catalyst for democratization. Political elites in unrecognized states often strive to adhere to international democratic standards to gain recognition, thereby demonstrating their state's worthiness to the global community. Voller (2015) highlights that the international community can leverage the recognition aspirations of these *de facto* states to enhance democratic practices through intense interaction. Similarly, MacQueen (2015) underscores that the necessity for political elites to resolve internal conflicts and establish political authority within their claimed territories fosters democratization. Beacháin (2012) observes that in Abkhazia, the threat of reintegration with the parent state has encouraged a culture of compromise among political elites and ethnic minorities. Likewise, Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2012) argue that political reforms in *de facto* states are often driven by the need to consolidate popular support against potential reintegration threats.

Conversely, other scholars contend that non-recognition can impede democratization. Protsyk (2012) notes that in Transnistria, the threat of absorption by the parent state causes political elites to cling to power, with little evidence that democratization leads to recognition. MacQueen (2015) articulates the problem of new states emerging from conflict in environments dominated by ethno-nationalism, resulting in exclusionary, extreme nationalist policies, a powerful executive with military influence, and a lack of both domestic and international accountability. Kolstø (2006) further argues that the absence of membership in international organizations exacerbates the lack of transparency and accountability. Kanol (2015) highlights that the isolation of *de facto* states forces them to rely on patron states for economic and military resources, which in turn demand political influence, thereby limiting the autonomy of elected elites.

The TRNC's dependence on Türkiye is evident in both economic and military realms. Economically, the TRNC has faced significant challenges due to its non-recognition by the international community. Initially, Turkish Cypriots managed to trade using stamps from the Republic of Cyprus (RoC). However, after switching to TRNC stamps, international restrictions were imposed. In 1994, the European Court of Justice banned trade with the TRNC, forcing Turkish Cypriot products to be exported through Türkiye, further isolating the TRNC economically (Gökçekuş, 2009). The Green Line Regulation in 2004 permitted limited trade with the RoC, but the lack of a comprehensive solution to the Cyprus problem has severely restricted substantial economic development.

Consequently, the TRNC is excluded from the European Union's single market, significantly hampering its economic growth and limiting foreign direct investment primarily to Turkish companies (Gökçekuş, 2009).

Tourism, a critical sector for many economies, has also been adversely affected by non-recognition. The TRNC cannot attract direct flights, stunting its tourism industry. Additionally, the inability to join international tourism organizations further restricts the TRNC's potential for tourism development, compounding its economic isolation (Gökçekuş, 2009). To sustain its economy, the TRNC relies heavily on financial aid from Türkiye. Between 2005 and 2014, Türkiye provided approximately \$2.71 billion in aid, essential for meeting financial obligations, including paying salaries and pensions for civil servants. This financial dependency underscores the TRNC's vulnerability and lack of economic autonomy (Hürriyet, 2015).

Türkiye's intervention led to the stationing of Turkish troops in Northern Cyprus, a presence that continues to this day (Dodd, 2010). The declaration of the TRNC in 1983 was perceived by Greek Cypriots as a secessionist move threatening the existence and sovereignty of the RoC. For Turkish Cypriots, however, Türkiye's military presence is seen as necessary for their security against potential threats from the RoC. This ongoing military presence underscores the TRNC's dependence on Türkiye for defense capabilities, as the TRNC lacks the resources to independently ensure its own security (Ker-Lindsay, 2014).

Despite its dependence on Türkiye, the TRNC demonstrates unique democratic practices as a non-recognized state (Kanol & Köprülü, 2017). Civil society and political actors in the TRNC have actively pushed for greater transparency and accountability. One prominent example is the initiative 'Toparlanıyoruz,' led by Kudret Özersay, which challenged politicians to uphold the rule of law and expose corruption (Haber Kıbrıs, 2012). This initiative reflects the proactive engagement of civil society in promoting democratic norms.

The TRNC has undertaken significant political reforms to enhance its democratic framework. Notable legal reforms include the shift towards a single-district electoral system designed to promote meritocracy, measures to restrict MPs from party-hopping, and enhancements to good governance practices (Yeni Düzen, 2013). These reforms aim to create a more stable and accountable political environment. However, the path to democratization in the TRNC faces several challenges. Economic dependency on Türkiye is a significant obstacle. The financial protocol with Türkiye mandated neoliberal reforms, which faced strong opposition from labor unions, indicating the TRNC's lack of economic independence (Kıbrıs Postası, 2012). Additionally, the influence of Türkiye's ruling AKP party and its Sunni Islamist policies has clashed with the TRNC's secular traditions, leading to increased religious institutions and mandatory religious courses in schools, sparking public debate and opposition from leftist parties and trade unions (Dayıoğlu, 2012). Further complicating the TRNC's democratization efforts is the Drinking Water Supply Project with Türkiye, which has caused political friction over resource management. Disputes over privatization versus local control have highlighted the tensions between Turkish influence and TRNC autonomy (Gündem Kıbrıs, 2016).

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the democratic practices within the TRNC, a de facto state with unique political and social dynamics due to its lack of widespread international recognition. By examining various facets of TRNC's political landscape, including its historical context, institutional framework, electoral processes, and the role of civil society, the paper sheds light on the complexities of democracy in such a unique geopolitical setting.

The TRNC's historical backdrop has significantly influenced its institutional framework, which blends elements of parliamentary and semi-presidential systems. The strong executive powers of the President, juxtaposed with legislative oversight, reflect a hybrid governance model that attempts to balance authority and democratic accountability.

The electoral system of the TRNC has evolved to enhance democratic representation. Utilizing a proportional representation system based on the d'Hondt method, the TRNC aims to ensure a fair distribution of seats among political parties. Recent reforms have introduced more flexibility for voters, allowing for both party and individual candidate preferences. However, the complexity of these voting procedures has faced criticism, and voter turnout has fluctuated, reflecting varying degrees of public engagement and trust in the political process.

Civil society in the TRNC plays a crucial role in promoting democratic norms and accountability. Initiatives like 'Toparlanıyoruz' demonstrate the proactive engagement of citizens and non-governmental organizations in advocating for transparency and anti-corruption measures. These efforts underscore the dynamic participation of civil society in shaping political discourse and holding public officials accountable.

The TRNC's economic and political dependence on Türkiye presents significant challenges to its democratic development. The financial protocols and external influence from Türkiye, particularly in areas of economic policy and religious education, have at times conflicted with the TRNC's secular traditions and aspirations for greater autonomy. These dependencies complicate the TRNC's efforts to establish a robust and independent democratic governance system.

In conclusion, while the TRNC faces unique challenges due to its de facto status and dependencies, its ongoing efforts in electoral reforms, civil society engagement, and institutional development highlight its commitment to democratic principles. Lastly, seeking broader international engagement and recognition, even if limited, can help the TRNC access more international aid and trade opportunities, with diplomatic efforts aimed at improving relations with other countries and international organizations.

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