Turkish Cypriot Mufti Struggle in the Media

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to provide information on the struggle to re-establish the Mufti of Cyprus, (abolished in 1928 by the British colonial government) in the context of the power of Turkish society media which began to be emphasized and highlighted in the pages of “Halkin Sesi” (People’s Voice) and “Istiklal” (Independence) newspapers first with articles to emphasize the importance of Muftis Struggle. Communication, which is one of the most essential properties in a society, is the key to inculcate the idea of social solidarity into people. The most important media of the period was the print press and this study examines its contributions to social solidarity of the community during British Period in Cyprus. During this period, the two most influential news paper “Halkin Sesi” and “Istiklal” and their communicational skills had countless effects on community and social solidarity. In this study, these effects and influences over a specific struggle are examined and interpreted. With this study, it is concluded that these two newspapers had very big impacts on the media of that period and they had really important contributions on the Mufti struggle of the community.

Key words: Mufti, British period, Halkin Sesi (People’s Voice), Istiklal (Independence), social solidarity, print press.

1. Introduction

Mufti of Cyprus, was established in 1571 by the Ottoman Empire after the conquest of the island and was an important institution steeped in religion. In 1878, the Ottoman Empire delegated their duties to the British which continued without changes until 1928, but with an arbitrary decision, the British colonial administration abolished the Mufti’s role. In other words, the British colonial administration first accepted the mufti role but with a sudden arbitrary decision in 1928 abolished the mufti institution. The Turkish Cypriot community did not accept the colonial rule decision which was incompatible with freedom of religion and started a big fight against the British.

The Encyclopedia Britannica (1989) defines Mufti as “Mufti or mufti, has the authority to give fatwa on the Islamic law system of jurisprudence, authority fetv usually from the Qur’an, hadith and tafsir information as well as having knowledge of previous fatwa [1].

Whereas the Meydan Larousse Encyclopedia (1972) defines Mufti as “Mufti or mufti, is the officer who gives fatwa in a province or district and is responsible for regulating and monitoring the religious services, and provides solutions on event and process on the Sharia [2].

As stated and highlighted in the above definitions, mufti is a very important person who is a religious scholar and an important member of the mufti institutions in the Islamic world. This position and its importance have been maintained in today Islamic world. The abolishment of such an important institution by the British colonial administration has never been accepted, as evident from the number of initiatives and events by the public and the long-term media power struggle process that was initiated.

“In the context of the Mufti struggle, the first major action was the holding of the National Congress in the capital, Nicosia in 1931. Representatives from all villages and towns of Cyprus gathered in Nicosia to hold the National Congress, where Lawyer Ahmet Sait of Paphos was declared the Mufti of Cyprus [3].

Unfortunately, the British administration did not accept the decision of the National Congress. (Turkish Affairs Committee Report, 1949) [4]. This
interference of a Christian state, in the religious affairs of the Muslim Turkish Cypriots via intervention and prohibitions was the biggest downloaded blow to the religious freedom. This policy of the British government was not only unacceptable but also contrary to the rule of law. This was a clear act of unfair ruling, as the British colonial government did not interfere with the religious affairs of the Orthodox Greeks.

In a letter written by the lawyer for Turkish Cypriot corporations Mr. Fadil Niyazi Korkut to the British Governor on the 31st of March 1947, in reference to the Mufti he states, “It is a debt to restore the Cypriot Mufti as the Turks had bestowed freedom on Christian Churches of Christianity” and requested the reinvigoration of mufti (Turkish Affairs Committee Report, 1949) [4].

2. İstiklal Newspaper

Under the directive of the British Governor, Lord Winster in 1948 proposed that the Turkish Affairs Committee Report of the mufti authority to be reestablished. Led by judge Mehmet Zeka Bey a two phase election proposed to elect the mufti selecting. However, the proposal was never put into practice and was placed on the waiting rafts by the government. The underlined aspect of the Committee report stated; In Islamic societies in the British dominions, and separated societies from the Ottoman Empire, the abolition of the office of the Muslim Mufti was never in question and was elected by the Turkish societies people. This was met with astonishment in Cyprus, despite being the exact circumstance.

The governments refraining from applying the Commissions report were rightly met with harsh criticism in the Turkish Cypriot media. The owner and head journalist of İstiklal (Independence) Newspaper M. Necati Ozkan was allowed these responses to be posted in his newspaper. The newspaper stated that Necmi Sagip Bodamyalizade had written a letter of application to the King of British and primitivest ion the 13th of July 1950 and petitioned the British Government of not having any right to appoint muftis in Cyprus and that it is considered an infringement of the freedom of religion against the bitter expressions use the article. The newspaper article stated:

“We have the honor to inform you that in our today’s issue, the headlines in big letters are about the telegram sent by Necmi Sagip Bodamyaliza to the prime minister and the King of England to protest their determination of the Turkish Cypriots Mufti.

Yes, we Muslims have ruled congregations belonging to other religions for centuries without infringing on their religious freedom, each congregation was allowed to choose their own religious leader without any objection from us. Countries still under Muslim administration today comply with the same principles of religious freedom Teknofor.

On the one hand, for every nation in the League of Nations the principles of religious freedom for all nations and communities are accepted and it is met with great pride throughout the world, while on the other hand, a non-Muslim governor of Cyprus appoints a religious leader for Muslims. What does this mean? What type of contrast is this? While the governor of Cyprus has no lawful right to appoint a priest for any greek village, how can he appoint a leader for us, a leader who will lead many of our businesses in fatwa, will set our organizational provisions and make decisions on many more vital congregational and religious work in our infinite power and authority, to determine entitlement and ownership, what entitles him the right?

We know very well that the King of England is not entitled to appoint a head priest or even a village priest. The King of England cannot give the governor of Cyprus the person and authority that he himself does not have. After this explanation, we whole heartedly support the protest of our solicitor and see it as a religious duty to do so [5].

The Colonial Government was continued to oppress
the Turkish Affairs Committee’s report. Because of this strict attitude, responses from society and media continued to grow. The owner and head journalist of İstiklal newspaper Mr. M. Necati Özkan worded his response in an article called “Governments role in Congregational Affairs and Awqaf and Mufti Affairs” and stated:

“In religious and Chairman of Religious Affairs or Mufti Affairs our people are again being treated differently. A large section of the society both city and village groups are voicing their discomfort with this situation especially. Our people want the same rights given to the Greek people, that is, to be able to elect their own Mufti in a democratic election, and to keep religious matters outside the control of the government. This is the right of any congregation. However, our government has taken a wrong decision in appointing a Mufti for us because it hopes to have some type of control on the decisions of the congregation. The appointment and duties of the Mufti encumbrances (recordings) is evidence of this. Whereas, there is no such control or recording for the Greeks. They have been granted the right to select their religious leader. Here are two different treatment under the same administration. At this point we must point out that we in Cyprus unfortunately are not allowed to participate in the selection of Mufti in any of the ruling parties. This is no excuse to not select a Mufti [6].

Keeping this topic live through the Turkish Cypriot Media and intellectuals was an important aspect as it effected the public. It was not long before the news in the media also had an effect on the English and after a while, a decision was made to reinstitute the Mufti. The owner and head journalist of İstiklal newspaper Mr. M. Necati Özkan confronted the decision of the government with great pleasure. This pleasure was reflected in the headlines of his article as “Satisfaction in our Governments Decision: Mufti and Awqaf Matters”. In summary, his article states:

“In 1930, I presented the troubled issue of the Mufti and wanted the restoration of the Mufti from the authorities. We are pleased with our government’s decision to restore the Mufti’s office. However, we would like to request from the government to grant us our election rights in selecting our own Mufti as is granted to the Greeks. Because in Muslim religious judgement Ulul orders the appointment of Muftis through election. If a Mufti comes to post by a non Muslim many of our religious worships like the Friday prayer and Eid prayer will not become permissible. As anyone Mufti who is posted does not have the religious judgment to deliver Ulul orders. This clear and explicit consideration on the point should be taken into account by our government as would be seen through the eyes of the millions of Muslim religious scholars under its administration, assessed and a decision should be made in accordance on this matter [7].

3. Halkin Sesi Newspaper

Another newspaper sensitive to the Mufti topic was Halkin Sesi (People’s Voice) owned and edited by Dr. Fazil Kucuk. This newspaper was persistent in posing social problems of its people like the delay in the decision of the Mufti and published a long editorial heading “Who is Responsible for the Delay in the Mufti Case?”. A part of this long extract states:

“A long time has passed since the Turkish Affairs Committee, Interim report. The government is busy trying to postpone quarter decade of backlog waiting on the rafts. There is no forcible reason to delay the Mufti case so long. Public values and wishes should not be subject to instability. Publics trust and respect for the government weakens. We ask: why haven’t the precautions been taken for securing a Mufti through election? Why are these duties being prolonged? The Ottoman empire gave the Greek churches their rights in one week. It revived a dying religion. However, the British Empire who intervened terribly in the Turks religious rights, once realising its fault should not delay the detriment of the community. Because the
British rule is a modern rule. Is democratic. Abides by the systems of law. Unfortunately, when it comes to Turkish issues they are placed in folders and put under weights [8].

Another intellectual of the time who proposed recommendations on the restatement of the Mufti as proposed in the Turkish Affairs Commission’s Interim Report was lawyer Ahmet Mithat Berberoglu. his article “Mufti Case” stated that until the Mufti elections were restored, it would not be possible to believe that the English did not interfere or have any respect for our religion. That the English did not have or show any respect for religion and religious differences and were stubborn in their attitudes.

“Turkish Cypriot Community is sensitive to the Mufti issue and are all related with it closely. We would like to see the proposals of the Turkish Affairs Commission in practice. The island is full of Turkish residential areas where religious needs are met by mosques and prayer areas, for these places to function normally a head or leader is required. The removal of the Cyprus Mufti post needs to be reestablished. In this process of re-organization, a selection by the community is vital to remove the damage. He continued by stating:

“In such behind the curtain, iron counties as Yugoslavia, Bulgaria where Turkish minority religious groups reside, religious affairs have been surrendered to Mufti’s, but I don’t know how the British Empire is going to justify the prohibition of this right to the Turkish Community living in Cyprus.

Those who know the true face of the British Empire, perhaps may not marvel at this great injustice; but in comparison with the Soviet Union, I’m sure will cause goose bumps at the injustice. The British administration who boasts of being freedom and justice symbol should remove their hands from Cypriot Turks religious matters. Until the restoration of the election system in the selection of a Mufti, it is, not possible to believe that the English authorities are not interfering or showing respect for our religion [9].

The only newspaper printed in English at the time was the Cyprus Mail. It supported the worthy fight of the Turkish people’s right to a Mufti chosen by them. Halkin Sesi newspaper translated the information given in the English newspaper under the headline “Cyprus Mail our allege supports our case”. The article stated that:

“Approximately 85,000 Turks have been complaining through their media of how the government has been neglectful and passive to many of the needs of the Turkish people. Such ongoing complaints of The Turkish Cypriots who have always remained loyal subjects to Great Britain will no doubt be investigated by the Turkish government with the deepest sympathy. As can be observed the Turkish people’s biggest complaint stems from the fact that while the Greeks are allowed to choose their religious leader the Turks cannot elect their own Mufti or religious leader. We must acknowledge that this is totally unfair and double standard treatment. Consequently, the government should accept the justified complaints of the Turkish people on this matter and rectify their injustice by eliminating the unfair administration in Cyprus to a one which is deserved of these people.

Halkin Sesi: “Being the only English-language newspaper on the island, we thank you “Cyprus Mail” for justly doing your job with honor and supporting us in our justified cause. We applaud you and hope you will stand beside us in our future fight for our rights [10].

The English Colonial government, kept the 1949 Turkish Affairs Committee Interim Report waiting for three years before finally putting the Mufti Election laws in the Official Newspaper then lawfully put it into function. The law is made up of 8 principles being; to be eligible for selection as a Mufti you must be at least 40 years old, must have a diploma from either Istanbul, Ankara or one of Al-Azhar universities, must retire upon reaching the age of 70.

Sometime after the Mufti Election Laws were set,
the government started preparing for elections and posted Salaheddin as Deputy Undersecretary in the Mufti Election. The Mufti selection forms were sent to the districts and thus the preparations were completed.

While everyone was waiting for the elections to take part the English government spontaneously and without consulting the Turkish heads, brought Yakut Cemal Menzilcioglu from Turkey as Fatwa Emin (head). This caused unnecessary strain on the groups as Menzilcioglu was known for being against Ataturk and labeled the Turkish Cypriots as being non-religious. Menzilcioglu’s character made him an undesirable man in Cyprus and led to his removal from Cyprus. Once the Turkish government learned of post Menzilcioglu’s post only lasted eight months.

After this incidence, Halkin Sesi Newspaper began to publish a serial of articles on what the personality of a Mufti should be. It outlined properties necessary for candidates to be elected to this important office. The first of these articles by Halkin Sesi is headed “Who is going to be our Mufti?” which basically stated the views:

“Our community is in great need of irradiance. This is a very important issue. As not everyone can be a Mufti to us. Our Mufti should be knowledgeable in every respect, speak several languages, energetic, brave, one that can tend to our wounds, and strong, in other words a true leader. This is why we must make a move now, leaving everything to the last minute is not acceptable, informing the public is a necessity [11].

In preparation for the Mufti elections, the Turkish Cypriot Associations Federation and Awqaf nominated Paphos Muderri Lord Mehmet Dana as a candidate for Mufti, as they believed that he would assist in the transfer of land, is intelligent and tied to Ataturk’s principles. Upon this, Dr. Fazil Kucuk published “Our Parola on Mufti”. In a section of this long article, Dr. Fazil Kucuk states:

“We are seeking a person we know inside and out, one that will fight for us, who we a sure of. That someone has finished this or that school, has a few diplomas, is a doctor, lawyer, chemist, these have never and could never concern us. We are looking for a brave, devoted person who will work towards the loyal revolutionary rights of our people. Menzicioglu was also a lawyer with accredited diplomas, but his head was as rotten as molded as that of a garbage can; wasn’t it like that of a rabbits brain, in a primitive state?

Our parolee is this. We will not accept anyone we do not know, or someone who is sent as puppet to us. We will accept however, a person from amongst us, who knows and follows our community’s case. This person is Paphos Muderri Lord Mehmet Dana. We will fight for this till the end. Down to fanatics! Long live the principles of Ataturk and those who will carry out his work with determination and fortitude [12]!”

Owner and editor of Istiklal newspaper M. Necati Ozkan supported Mahmut Kamil Toker of Urfa as a Mufti candidate. In the meantime, the candidates for Mufti elections had been announced by the head of Mufti elections—Mr. Salahaddin. The third candidate in the elections was Ahmet Fehim Topukcu.

The election was set to be held on the 23rd of July 1953. Unfortunately, due to immense objections to all three candidates, the elections had to be postponed indefinitely. The Supreme Court to view the objections to the legal qualifications of the Mufti candidates was initiated on the 30th of July in Nicosia. The committee was composed of Board of Appeals Judge Mehmet Zeka, District Judge Vedat Dervis and Magistrate for Peace Eren Kemal. The court first listened to and rejected the objections to Mehmet Dana and stressed that his credentials were issued by a competent madras as of Phaphos [13].

The second to be investigated was Ahmet Fehim Topukcu’s credentials which was refused due to evidence found that his credentials were not given in accordance with the laws Ulema Mufti and thus is not applicable in provisions of law. After a 20 minutes interval, the courts re-jerned to hear the objections of
attorney Ali Dana against Mahmut Kamil Toker. However, attorney Ali Dana withdrew the appeal so that the case would not drag on. Thus, the Tribunal judge accepted Mahmut Kamil Toker’s licence and declared him as a Mufti candidate [14].

While everyone waited for the elections to take place after all of this, the head of Mufti selection board Salahedd in postponed the elections due to Paphos earthquake disaster, and the fact that candidate Mahmut Kamil Toker being in Turkey. This lead to a huge response from the Turkish press [15].

The elections which were supposed to have occurred in September 1953 and postponed to October the 11th due to the Paphos earthquake was than postponed again to the 30th of December by the English regime. Although, during the process of the elections, candidate Mahmut Kamil Toker of Istanbul had sent a letter resigning from the Mufti elections to the Mufti selection board head, renounced in favour of the Cypriot Mehmet Dana, the British government made the Turks hold the elections.

On Sunday the 30th of December, second voters united and unanimously voted Paphos Muderri Mehmet Dana as Mufti of Cyprus. Thus, the Mufti office which was abolished by the British colonial rule in 1928 was re-established [16].

4. Conclusions

When people find themselves in a dangerous condition, they tend to become defensive in order to protect themselves. They start struggling against this danger that they come across. Just like individuals, societies act the same when their existence is endangered.

Society is not just a group of citizens or individuals. A group of citizens should have the same perspective about common values and these groups of people should stick together with all their institutions and organisations. Media, especially the print press have great impacts on developing a common sense about social solidarity, to be considered as a community and also to pursue their existence.

It is not possible to ignore the contributions of two newspapers Halkin Sesi and Istiklal in the social solidarity struggle of Turkish community. In particular, Halkin Sesi, with its high circulation and courageous publications disturbing the British rule during the whole period.

This study is about a specific part of this long struggle and can be developed by working on many other social cases of the period.

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