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The Politics of Cyprus

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Introduction

The island of Cyprus has long stood at the crossroads of civilizations, its position in the Eastern Mediterranean serving both as a blessing and a curse. Over centuries, waves of conquest, settlement, and cultural transformation have indelibly marked the island, shaping the unique political identity that persists today. From the arrival of ancient Greeks to centuries of imperial domination, and finally the emergence of a modern republic, Cyprus's political landscape is the product of complex historical, social, and geopolitical forces.

At the heart of Cypriot politics lies the enduring division between Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. This division, manifested in governance, everyday life, physical barriers, and international relations, profoundly influences every aspect of political life in Cyprus. The events of 1974, when a coup d'état by Greek Cypriot nationalists was met with Turkish military intervention, resulted in the de facto partition of the island and have defined the political discourse ever since.

Understanding Cyprus's political system is impossible without grasping the depth and persistence of this core issue, often referred to simply as "the Cyprus problem."

Yet, the politics of Cyprus cannot be reduced only to its divisions. The Republic of Cyprus has developed robust state institutions, including a presidential system, an independent judiciary, and a tradition of parliamentary democracy. The party system is dynamic and vibrant, with allegiances shaped by left-right ideology, socioeconomic priorities, and, substantively, differing visions for the island's future. Over the past decades, Cypriot politics has also evolved in response to changing social attitudes, global economic realities, and its membership in the European Union.

The complexities of governance are further compounded by external influences. Cyprus's strategic position attracts the interests of regional and global powers, from the United Kingdom and the United States to Russia and, especially, Greece and Turkey. International organizations, most prominently the United Nations and the European Union, have played central roles in mediation efforts and shaping the island's international posture. The stakes of these external relationships continue to grow as new challenges—such as the migration crisis or the geopolitics of energy—emerge.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of Cyprus, charting its historical development, dissecting its state institutions, outlining its party system, and examining the impact of the island's division on both the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. It explores not only formal structures but also the informal dynamics—identity, public opinion, and

grassroots activism—that shape Cypriot political life.

Ultimately, understanding the politics of Cyprus is essential not only for those interested in the Eastern Mediterranean but also for anyone seeking to unravel the complexities of divided societies and the enduring power of historical memory in shaping political destinies. As the island continues to face significant uncertainties and challenges, the resilience, adaptability, and aspirations of its people will determine whether Cyprus's future is one of continued separation or renewed unity. This guide aims to illuminate the path to that future by unpacking the intricacies and enduring paradoxes of Cypriot politics.

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CHAPTER ONE: Historical Origins of Cypriot Politics

The story of Cypriot politics is an epic, stretching back thousands of years, with the island's strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean making it a coveted prize for numerous empires and civilizations. Its political landscape, as we see it today, is not a recent phenomenon but a tapestry woven from the threads of successive dominations and the enduring character of its inhabitants. From its earliest known settlements, Cyprus has been a place of layers, each adding a new dimension to its complex identity.

The island's history of governance begins to solidify with the emergence of political structures during the Bronze Age. Influenced by vibrant cultures like the Minoans and Mycenaeans, Cyprus saw the rise of city-kingdoms such as Salamis and Kition. These early political entities, though maintaining a degree of local autonomy under their own kings, often found themselves subservient to more powerful external forces. The Mycenaeans, in particular, left a significant mark, introducing administrative practices and contributing to the island's burgeoning trade network.

As the Bronze Age waned, Cyprus entered the Iron Age, and while contact with Greece initially lessened, ties with the Near East strengthened. This period saw the arrival of the Phoenicians, who established a colony at Kition in the ninth century BCE. The Phoenician presence further enriched the island's cultural mix and expanded Kition's political influence.

The eighth century BCE brought Cyprus under the sway of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. A stele erected by Sargon II at Kition in 709 BCE recorded that seven Cypriot kings paid him homage, and later Assyrian documents listed eleven tributary kingdoms. While this subordination was likely more nominal than direct, it marked the island's integration into the complex web of ancient Near Eastern politics. The Assyrians, though distant, introduced a more centralized administrative concept that would echo in later periods.

Following the decline of the Assyrian Empire, Cyprus experienced a brief period of independence before falling under Egyptian influence in the sixth century BCE. This was followed by the incorporation of the island into the vast Achaemenid Persian Empire around 525 BCE. The Persians largely allowed the existing city-kingdoms to maintain their autonomy, demanding tribute and military support when needed. This period, lasting for two centuries, saw the Cypriot kings navigate a relationship of suzerainty with their powerful overlords.

The arrival of Alexander the Great in 333 BCE marked a significant shift, liberating

Cyprus from Persian rule and integrating it into his Hellenistic empire. Cypriot naval forces even aided Alexander in his siege of Tyre. Following Alexander's death and the subsequent Wars of the Diadochi, Cyprus became part of the Hellenistic Kingdom of Ptolemaic Egypt. The Ptolemies ruled from Paphos and abolished the independent city-kings, establishing a unified administration and a single currency. This era saw the island become fully Hellenized, with Greek becoming the dominant language.

In 58 BCE, Cyprus was annexed by the Roman Republic, becoming a Roman province by 22 BCE. Roman rule brought a period of relative stability and economic growth, despite facing challenges like revolts and natural disasters. The Romans divided the island into four main districts for administrative purposes. While local councils existed, the ultimate authority rested with Roman officials. Christianity also began to spread on the island during this time, following the visit of Apostles Paul and Barnabas.

The division of the Roman Empire in 395 AD saw Cyprus become a province of the East Roman or Byzantine Empire, under whose control it would largely remain for the next 900 years. Byzantine rule introduced a centralized administration with appointed officials. This long period solidified the island's Hellenistic-Christian character. However, the island's strategic importance also made it a target, and it experienced periods of Arab raids and even joint rule with the Arab Caliphates for a time.

The Crusades brought another wave of external influence. Richard the Lionheart conquered Cyprus in 1191, selling it first to the Knights Templar and then to Guy de Lusignan in 1192. The French House of Lusignan established a feudal kingdom, introducing the Roman Catholic faith as the official religion, a move that was not always welcomed by the predominantly Orthodox population. The Lusignan period saw the construction of many churches and cathedrals and positioned Cyprus as an important base for the Crusades, but also subjected the local population to heavy taxation and exploitation.

The weakening of the Lusignan kingdom and internal power struggles paved the way for the Republic of Venice to gradually assert its control. Through a combination of diplomatic maneuvering and exploiting dynastic links, Venice formally annexed Cyprus in 1489. The Venetians viewed Cyprus primarily as a commercial hub and sought to exploit its resources. They established a centralized bureaucratic system, which, while enhancing trade, created a new social hierarchy that often placed Venetian nobles in positions of power over Cypriots. The imposition of new laws and taxes also caused friction. The Venetians fortified cities like Nicosia and Famagusta, anticipating the growing threat from the Ottoman Empire.

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