



THEME 4: Regional conflicts

Collection of materials

Muslims in Thrace

I. Political control of the minority, permanent target of Ankara

Since the signing of the Lausanne Treaty and especially the three last decades, the primary target of Ankara in the region of Thrace is the total and indisputable political control of the minority. This is the main mission of the Turkish consulate in Komotini. The consulate threatens and pressures those of the minority who are not in line with the orders.

Taking advantage of the fact that most Muslims have property in Turkey and send their children to study there, they put pressure on the non-aligned. Turkish policy in the field of the minority acquired a more aggressive character since the beginning of 1988. Until 1991, the Greek authorities applied certain restrictions and some discrimination against the Muslims. The only results of this policy, was that some civil servants became rich through bribing in order to facilitate their transactions. On 14.05.1991, the Mitsotakis government announced the lift of the existing restrictions. The Turkish propaganda tried to pass the impression that Athens gave way to Ankara's pressure..... but in the long run it had an appeasing effect on the relations between the two coexisting elements of Thrace. The establishment of the 3% limit in order for a party to be represented in parliament put also an end to the experiment of the independent Muslim election lists. Since the election of 1993, the Muslim minority is represented by candidates who are included in the election lists of the parties.

Kathimerini, 16/05/2004

Ia. The 1990 events

On 20.01.1990 the coordination committee of the minority declares abstention from schools, demanding the use of Turkish school books, but in reality to exercise pressure to support Sadik and the pseudomoufti Serif, who stood trial on previous offences. On 26.01.1990 they were both convicted in the court of first instance to 18 month imprisonment. (On 30.02.1990 they paid out the reduced by the court of appeal sentences imposed on them and were released from prison). The Muslim Hassan Sali actually attacked and killed Angelos Solakidis in the hospital of Komotini.

This murder and all previous events worsened the atmosphere. Despite police forbiddance, various incidents occurred. The demonstration of the Muslims caused a counter demonstration of the Christians, who smashed the shop windows of Muslim shops, without however massive acts of violence against the minority. It was about a blind reaction of the Christian element. Turkey tried to take advantage of these sad events in order to accuse Greece internationally by a letter of Yilmaz to all governments. The Greek government deported the Turkish consul and in reciprocation Ankara deported the Greek consul in Constantinople. In the election of April 1990, Achmet Sadik was elected in Rodopi taking 35,28% of the vote and Faik Faikoglou was elected in Xanthi taking 25,61%.

II. A series of episodes in a mosque in Thrace

The atmosphere remained tense until late at night at the mountainous village of Echinis in Xanthi after the incidents which occurred during the attempt of members of the TV team to film scenes for the TV series «Archipelago» of the TV channel Alpha. The Muslim inhabitants of the village claim that the actors entered illegally a mosque in the area and filmed offensive scenes thus justifying the acts of violence against the TV team, who had to take shelter at the local police station, asking police protection. The leading actors of the TV series, who said that they simply approached a marquee outside the mosque in order to protect themselves from the heavy rain, deny this version...

The incident was aggravated, as a number of about 500 outraged Muslims gathered on the spot, demanded that the films should be handed to them. Spirits were not calmed down, even when the films were given to the Imam of the village, with the crowd following and assaulting the actors and the technicians up to the police station. According to unverified testimonies given by Muslims, the fact that caused their rage was that the scenes of the series were taken in the interior of the mosque, where one of the leading actresses is shown half-naked to perform belly dancing. This was also supported by the deputy Mayor of Echinós, Mr. Housein Yazoutzi, who in an interview given to the newspaper 'Kathimerini', claimed that 'at least ten people saw the cameras shooting a half-naked woman dancing, testifying this to the police'.

It is worth mentioning that when all this was happening most Muslims in Echinós were praying in a neighbouring mosque celebrating Seker Bairam (something like Christmas for Christians). This obviously contributed to their rath when they heard of the above incident. On yesterday's news on the TV channel Alpha, thought, all these accusations were denied, while the responsible for the series were assuring that not only no actor entered the mosque, but because of the rain the open air shootings were cancelled all together. In any event, the case has now been taken up by the court, since the Mayor of Echinós and the Imam of the mosque lodged complaints for offence of their religious symbols. A communiqué was finally issued by the government. The official position of the Greek state is the absolute respect of the secrete character of the religious places of all cults, as Mr. Antonaros stated.

Kathimerini, 17/11/2004

III. The bar and the taboo

The name 'Echinós' was yesterday probably a meaningless sound on most people's mind (maybe that is why we heard it and saw it on the screen written in a wrong way) especially of those who were born and live under the frontline of Tempi and who did not happen to do their military service in the north of the country. If they visited place, for example Thassos or Samothrace as tourists, they most probably went fast across the country without seeing it properly or getting the feeling of it. The word, 'Pomac' probably does not mean a lot and maybe that is why it was not heard on the news at all. The word 'bar' as well, is probably a sound without a meaning and not only to younger people. The elderly knew a little about this taboo matter of shame. Until the European Greece of 1996, the bar well existed to separate (and that in the daylight), a local man or a visitor had to ask for permission by the police or the army. And this, because in reality some citizens of Greece were not recognized as citizens of Greece with full rights.

Today, because of the brief and superficial interest taken by the electronic media, what meaning is left to the word 'Echinós'? Is it perhaps registered as a name of fanatics, religiously obsessed, trapped in previous decades excluded from our extraordinary European achievements? This is what probably happened, because what was suggested by TV was precisely repeated by some so-called experts on TV 'windows' in Athens. The memory of these experts was, however, proved to be short, not extending to the attacks of Christians at cinemas, showing 'offensive' films, the burning of 'insulting' books, the Rotonda case in Thessaloniki etc.

The bar on the mountains of Yanthi is gone. It is not sure, though that it has also gone out of our minds, especially of those identifying Greece with the Athenian glamour and 'comfort'. Visiting a village with a superiority feeling of 'civilization', allowing to solve any problem with a ten euro tipping of the 'indigenous', one thing is sure: that he will stumble on the bar carried in him.

By PANTELIS BOUKALAS
Kathimerini, 20/11/2004

IV. The fear syndrome of Athens

The incident would not be of great importance if the way it was dealt with did not remind us once again that the upper class in Athens has reached a point where they perceive the relation between Greece and Turkey as the well known "Finland syndrome". (e.g. the way Finland was related to the former USSR).

We do not know the facts directly, but we have no reason to doubt the evidence given by the actors who were submitted to violence and threatened to be attacked by the Muslim crowd in Echinós in Yanthi. The film did not offend the mosque. But even if it is supposed that someone acted without the necessary respect, the reaction of the Muslims exceeds any limit.

Some people wonder how it is possible at first to welcome the actors to Echinus and the other day and then attack them. The answer is given by history. Even those Ottomans showing goodwill in their personal relations changed radically when becoming a crowd. The same happens with all nations, though more easily when individuality is less developed. Moreover, it is evident that the background Western Thrace is explosive.

It seems that there is an aggressive mood, manifesting itself at the first chance and that without punishment. The Greek minority, as for example that in Imvros would not even think of doing something like this, even if they had suffered the worse abuse for they know very well what oppression and fear means.

The most important, though, in this case is the way the government in Athens reacted. The government did whatever it could in order to close the case as quick as possible. Getting this message, the local competent authorities not only avoided to find the responsible for these violent acts, but they also tried to treat gently the responsible, obliging the victims to give account! The same atmosphere was created in the TV channels as well. The fear syndrome, well hidden under ideological cover has affected the government and all political parties to a degree determining Greek foreign policy. Let us judge the result by the facts: at a time when Ankara needs the 'yes' of Athens and Nicosia more than ever, Turkey does not hesitate to provoke in the Aegean and to deny recognition of the Cypriot Republic, while Greece doesn't even have the courage to clearly state its views, which are in accordance with the International Law and the Treaties which have been signed.

By STAVROS LYGEROS
Kathimerini, 19/11/2004