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Will He or Won't He?

Greek Cypriots have elected a new President who may—or may not—push for the island's reunification

By JENNIE JAMES

IS REUNIFICATION FINALLY AT HAND FOR Cyprus? On Feb. 16 Tassos Papadopoulos, 69, grabbed a surprise victory in presidential elections in the Greek section of Cyprus, the Mediterranean island that has been divided into Greek and Turkish enclaves since Turkey invaded the north in 1974. So when U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan visits Cyprus this week as part of an attempt to enforce the U.N.'s Feb. 28 deadline for a plan to stitch the island back together, he will not be dealing with defeated incumbent Glafcos Clerides, who was favorably disposed toward reunification. Instead, Annan will have to address the ideology of canny President-elect Papadopoulos, who has a long, rejectionist history of opposing settlements.

Annan can take some comfort from the fact that Papadopoulos recently seems to have had a change of heart. During his election campaign, Papadopoulos had the crucial backing of AKEL, Cyprus' powerful communist party, which is strongly in favor of reunification. "Papadopoulos had to soften up because ... AKEL is traditionally moderate and open with the Turkish Cypriot community," says one Cypriot political strategist in Nicosia. In his victory speech, Papadopoulos made a point of pledging to work with Turkish Cypriot "compatriots" to find a settlement.

International mediators have been trying to find a solution to the Cyprus question since intercommunal fighting broke out on the island in 1963. The 1974 division occurred when the Turkish army, in response to a Greece-backed coup, invaded and occupied roughly one-third of Cyprus along its northern shore. The result: the "green line" that separates the formerly thriving but now-underdeveloped Turkish northern part from the comparatively affluent Greek southern part.

The U.N. plan calls for the Greek and Turkish regions of Cyprus to be reunited as a confederation of two states, joined loosely by a central government but with both regions maintaining separate administrations. The arrangement would be overseen by troops from Greece and Turkey. Some critics worry such a plan will solidify some existing divisions. Notes Andreas Theophanous, a political economist in Nicosia: "It establishes a divisive and dysfunctional system of governance." But for others—including Pa-

padopoulos himself—the outlook seems more positive. The President-elect sees Clerides' line as a basis for future talks, and in his victory speech told supporters: "We want negotiations ... so that both communities can function under the plan."

Once again, the U.N. may find itself embroiled in the endless politicking that plagues Cypriot peace initiatives. Last December, Cypriot leaders were given a choice: agree to the plan or be ostracized from the European Union. At the last minute, Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash, who says the U.N. is trying to turn Cyprus into a "Greek island," was not present to sign the agreement—said to be because of illness—though Clerides was prepared to do the deal. Although Denktash's resistance is being weakened by protests at home and a loss of support from the Turkish government—which wants him to agree to the plan to boost Turkey's bid for E.U. admission—he is nevertheless insisting that it will be impossible to meet the Feb. 28 deadline because he doesn't believe there is enough trust between the two communities. Papadopoulos' victory may have strengthened the Turkish Cypriot leader's resolve. "As long as Papadopoulos does not draw himself a realistic plan and abandon his imaginary solutions, there is no reason to continue with this dead-end process," Denktash said after the election results.

Papadopoulos is not an obvious peacemaker. He studied law in Britain and be-



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came a successful lawyer and politician, after having fought with EOKA, Cyprus' nationalist guerrilla movement, against British troops who occupied the island in the 1950s. In the 1990s, Papadopoulos was a legal adviser to Beogradska Banka, the Yugoslav state-owned bank, during Slobodan Milosevic's rule—an association that seemed at the time to bring him into conflict with U.S. officials.

But with Milosevic now in jail, and a war looming against Iraq, all that appears to have changed. After all, Cyprus' strategic location and logistics and communications facilities could prove invaluable to the U.S. The new President has a lot of complicated decisions to make. —Reported by Anthea Carassava/Athens and Pelin Turgut/Istanbul