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Defining the “majority” in the General Assembly of Cretans between 1878 and 1889: The transition from religious towards political disputes

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the question of politicization in Crete during the late Ottoman period, specifically between the years 1878 and 1889. By focusing on the minutes of the General Assembly, I argue that although the terms “majority” and “minority” as used by the representatives of the time initially referred to religious groups, they gradually acquired a purely political content. This transition was part of the emergence of a local political scene on the island within which party politics played a dominant role.

KEY WORDS: Late Ottoman Crete, Ottoman peripheries, Ottoman reforms, Empire building from below, Politicization, Party politics, General Assembly of Cretans.

During the late Ottoman period, the administrative and governing structures of Crete were gradually subjected to an intense reform program. These reforms were part of a wider reform project introduced across the empire during the second half of the 19th century, mainly known as the Tanzimat reforms. More specifically, the main Tanzimat innovations in the fields of government and state administration were instituted in Crete through the Organic Law of 1868¹ and the Halepa Pact of 1878.² For the purposes of this paper I focus on the General Assembly of Cretans (G.A.), as the main³ representative governing body established through these legislative acts. By examining the meaning of the terms “majority” and “minority” as used

¹ The Organic Law was published on 8 January 1868. It consisted of 12 fundamental articles regulating the administrative structure of the island and granting a series of tax exemptions. These articles were accompanied by a series of provisions including the establishment of interreligious courts and the foundation of a local parliament, named the “General Assembly of Cretans” [Γενική των Κρητών Συνέλευσις], the highest legislative institution in Crete. “Οργανικός Νόμος της Κρήτης” [Organic Law of Crete], in *Κρητικός Κώδιξ* [Cretan Code], Chania 1893, vol. I, pp. 5-33.

² The Pact was signed at Halepa (a district of Chania) by 10 representatives of the General Assembly, the General Commander of Crete, a delegate of the central Ottoman administration, and the ambassador of the British Empire on 3 October 1878. Its main proclaimed goal was to ensure the application of the Organic Law, which had never been properly applied. Despite being a sequel, the Halepa Pact presents major modifications compared to the Organic Law. From that point onwards, the General Commander could be either a Muslim or a Christian and the judicial power was recognized as independent from the executive power. Furthermore, the publication of private newspapers and the foundation of associations were legislated for the first time. “Η εν Χαλέπα Σύμβασις” [The Halepa Pact], in *Cretan Code*, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-39.

³ Apart from the General Assembly, 88 local councils (and municipalities) were established under the law on the establishment of municipalities, enacted by the G.A. in 1879.

in the Assembly during the course of the parliamentary years, I argue that a wider transition from religious towards political conflicts took place on the island between the years 1878 and 1889. With the minutes of the G.A. as my main source for this paper,⁴ I also attempt to highlight the simultaneous development of party politics in Crete during the late Ottoman period.

“WE PROTEST IN THE NAME OF THE MINORITY!”⁵

The above quote is one of the most common phrases recorded in the minutes of the G.A. during the parliamentary periods of 1878-1889. The legislative acts of both the Organic Law and the Halepa Pact made no provisions regarding the designated composition of groups of representatives, and thus no mention was made of the terms “majority” and “minority”. Only the term “majority” is noted in the Halepa Pact, strictly referring to the threshold of two-thirds of the vote required in order to introduce laws supplementary to the Ottoman legislation, to vote for additional laws or to modify the fundamental laws introduced by these acts.⁶

Nevertheless, as early as 1879, these terms were used by the representatives with meanings extending beyond the officially recognized two-thirds “majority”. At that time, the term “minority” was extensively used by representatives elected by the Muslim Demogerontia⁷ in order to express their concerns regarding what they perceived as “violation of the minority’s rights”. This reaction was usually adopted in order to oppose proposals made by Christian representatives about regulating religious institution funds. The financing of local religious institutions, specifically the way in which state funding was to be distributed between the two recognized religious communities,⁸ was the main cause of conflict during the first years of the G.A.’s operation.

An indicative instance of the contemporary perception of which grouping was perceived as the “majority” and which the “minority” within the Assembly can be noted during the presentation of the state population census on 21 November 1879. Commenting on the census results, Christian representative Voreadis argued for the need for what he perceived as a “fairer way” to split

⁴ According to article 16 of the Organic Law, the sessions of the G.A. were not open to the public, the minutes were recorded (article 24) and summaries were supposed to be published in “Κρήτη” [Kriti/Crete], the official newspaper of the administration (article 33). The G.A. did not function smoothly until 1877, resulting in a significant lack of archival sources regarding this period. Nevertheless, under article 15 of the Halepa Pact the main sessions of the G.A. were opened to the public and the minutes were regularly published in the press.

⁵ In Greek: “Διαμαρτυρόμεθα εις το όνομα της μειο(νο)ψηφίας”.

⁶ In accordance with article 4 of the Halepa Pact. “Pact of Halepa”, *op. cit.*, p.37. It should also be mentioned that under article 3 of the Halepa Pact, 49 Christian and 31 Muslim representatives were elected rather than 42 and 38 respectively, as previously required by the Organic Law. Thus, from 1878 onwards, two-thirds of the vote corresponded to 53 representatives.

⁷ The institution of the Demogerontia (“Council of Elders”) was established in Crete through an imperial edict published in 1858. The institution initially operated as a local decision-making council comprised of “distinguished members” of the local Christian and Muslim communities respectively in each region of the island. These Councils mainly dealt with issues concerning family and inheritance law and supervised public services, such as hospitals and schools. Their duties were extended by the Organic Law and the Demogeronties were nominated as the electoral body for the staffing of the G.A.

⁸ Referring to the numerically dominant religious communities (Muslims and Orthodox Christians), as there was no provision for the representation of other religious groups living on the island, such as Jews and Catholics.

state funding: “He who is able to see clear and has truth –rather than racial interest– as his only point of view, should agree that the fairest way [to split state funding] is on the basis of the population data.”⁹ Voreadis’s argument was refuted by Muslim representative Dervis Efendi, who commented that:

*It seems that Mr Voreadis is a supporter of socialistic [sic] ideas [...]. Thus I would like to ask the Assembly to vote on the following matter: do we need the Muslims in Crete or not? I believe the majority will decide wisely.*¹⁰

This rather provocative statement is suggestive of the way part of the Muslim population strongly opposed the abolition of privileges established in the name of the previous superiority of the Muslim faith, and was intended to trigger the most conservative reflexes among the representatives. Although Dervis Efendi’s statement resulted in tension in the Assembly, leading the chairman to suspend the discussion, another representative attempted to reach compromise by stating:

*We are all working hard to promote culture and progress in our homeland. A few Muslim representatives [...] have complained that the actions of the majority are unjust to them. The science of Law teaches us that injustice produces reaction but it is always justice that finally prevails. The modern history of Crete teaches us the same. The majority of the Christian representatives is truly aware of that and will not succumb to the sin of appropriating this majority for their own benefit. [...] We should not split the assembly on account of religion and we should decide on the basis of justice; we should determine the decisive factor [of distributing state funding] to be the number of children attending the schools of each institution.*¹¹

Through the Ottoman reform program, religion was nominated as the main decisive factor separating the population into different groups (*millets*) that were recognized as having equal rights and obligations. Subsequently, on the local level, the superiority of one group over another was based on the size of its population. In line with this new status quo, Muslim representatives formed the “minority” of the Assembly while Christian representatives constituted the “majority”.. Some Christian representatives intended to use their numerical superiority in the G.A. in order to promote the growth and funding of Christian institutions, in some cases to the detriment of the Muslim ones. At the same time, some of the Muslim representatives were constantly protesting against the abolition of their privileges or even against what was perceived as repression of their community by the numerically dominant Christian community. Some representatives also aimed to reach a compromise by promoting an agenda perceiving religion as a non-decisive factor regarding the decisions the G.A. had to take. It should also be noted that the two-thirds majority threshold was an imperative factor encouraging coalitions within the G.A. across religious lines. The tendency to compromise, although initially not dominant, was already visible from the first year of the G.A.’s operation and seems to have been shared by the

⁹ *Kriti*, n.623, 23/1/1882, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 2-3.

policy adopted by the General Commander (G.C.) at the time, Fotiadis Pasha. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that the terms “majority” and “minority” during the first years of the G.A.’s operation exclusively referred to the Christian and Muslim representatives respectively, as concrete groups.

MINOR SESSIONS; RECURRING DISPUTES CHALLENGING UNITY ON THE BASIS OF RELIGION

The distinction of the Ottoman population on the basis of religion was a fundamental tool adopted by the state in its proclaimed goal of equality among Ottoman citizens. This central state policy was also reflected in the local administration of Crete under the Organic Law and the Halepa Pact. Subsequently, in addition to the G.A. main session, two “minor” sessions were established; one for the representatives elected as Muslims and one for those elected as Christians.¹² These sessions dealt exclusively with the operation of the religious institutions and issues concerning their communities. Both sessions were closed to the public and their minutes were not published. Over time, increasing diversity becomes apparent among the representatives participating in both minor sessions. These controversies, initially occurring in the minor sessions, were often transferred – thus becoming visible – to the main sessions of the G.A.

An illustrative instance of this tendency is observed in 1884. Although, until that parliamentary year, the staffing of the G.A. committees¹³ had been treated as a formality, that was not the case with the 1884 session. The representative Ahmed Efendi Argyrakis submitted a list of names of Muslim representatives who, according to him, “had been approved by our majority” to staff the committees. The submission of this list was opposed by representative Yusuf Vei, who raised an objection. Among other arguments, those reacting claimed that “the constituencies were not free to choose the members [of the committees]. On the contrary, this list was drawn up by the majority and only a few members of the minority were included”.¹⁴ This debate came to an end with Argyrakis stating that “it is the opinion of the majority which should prevail, not that of the minority”.¹⁵ This instance of internal dispute among Muslim representatives directly challenges the image of a coherent and concrete group. Moreover, the references to “majorities” and “minorities” imply the emergence of diversified grouping within the minor sessions.

This kind of debate gradually led to the creation of visible opposing sides within both the Muslim and the Christian sessions, especially from the mid-1880s onwards. Illustrative of this development is a statement made by representative Nesimi Efendi in June 1888:

Due to the fact that this year we are called upon in the Minor sessions to elect representatives for the evkafs¹⁶ and the education institutions, the minority of the Islamists¹⁷ intends to

¹² In line with article 28 of the Halepa Pact. “Halepa Pact”, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹³ According to article 25 of the Halepa Pact, committees were formed within the G.A. with duties such as collecting and prioritizing the subjects to be discussed each parliamentary year. “Halepa Pact”, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁴ *Kriti*, n.695, 28/5/1884, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, n.696, 3/6/1884, p. 1.

¹⁶ Pious foundations supporting charitable activities.

¹⁷ In Greek: “ισλάμηδες”, referring to the followers of Islam but not in the sense of fundamentalists, as the modern term “Islamists” implies.

ensure that it prevails by any means. The Islamists are seeking to win an extra couple of votes in order to secure the majority. [To do so,] they have requested the support of the majority of the Christians. [...] The majority of the Christians, on the contrary, has no such need because their number is such that they do not need [the vote of] any of the Muslims, nor even [the vote of] an extra Christian in order to secure the majority in their sessions.¹⁸

This quote not only further contributes to an image of disunity among the Muslim and Christian representatives respectively, but also directly refers to the establishment of interfaith collaboration among representatives for the purpose of achieving specific goals.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERFAITH PARTY POLITICS

The emergence of a local political scene and the main characteristics of the contemporary political groupings become even more visible when we examine specific issues that were steadily provoking tension in the G.A. I therefore examine the most common of these: the verification of the electoral outcome and the staffing of the General Administrative Council (G.A.C.).¹⁹

Accusations and appeals against the legitimacy of elected representatives were routine during the first sessions of the G.A., especially from the mid-1880s onwards. The 1888 G.A. session throws this situation into sharp relief. During that parliamentary year 41 appeals were raised,²⁰ meaning that the majority of representatives' seats were brought into question. The representatives not facing objections spent almost half of the parliamentary period discussing these appeals. This situation led representative Mihelidakis to question the legality of the procedure and claim that the participating representatives, including himself, "are not members of an assembly but rather [members] of an electoral court".²¹

Two years earlier, during the first session of 1886, one case seemed to stand out from the rest of the objections raised. This was the discussion on the validity of the Heraklion district electoral outcome, more specifically that of the Christian Demogerontia. The candidate who had failed to be elected (Stavrakis) appealed against the other candidate, Thiakakis, claiming that the latter had used illegal methods (intimidation and vote buyout) in order to guarantee his election. The Assembly rapidly split into two sides, each accusing the other. Representative Xanthoudidis, among those supporting Thiakakis, stated:

I perceived it as my duty to respond [...] not in order to revise the opinion of the majority that has a pre-specified decision regarding the Heraklion election [...] but in order not to participate in the outrage that the majority of the Assembly is today going to commit. This majority was achieved through many different means. [...] As I know, a month ago the leader of

¹⁸ *Kriti*, n.935, 25/6/1888, pp. 2-3.

¹⁹ The G.A.C. was established by the Organic Law and consisted of six members: the General Commander, the Inspector of Justice [Επιθεωρητής της Δικαιοσύνης], the Metropolitan, the General Cashier, the two General Secretaries, three Muslim members elected by the Muslim inhabitants, and three Christians elected by the non-Muslim inhabitants. The duties of the G.A.C. were to be "strictly administrative" and "by no means exercising Executive and Judicial Authority". "Organic Law", *op. cit.*, pp. 22-25.

²⁰ *Kriti*, n.926, 14/5/1888, p. 4 and *Ibid*, n.931, 5/6/1888, p. 2.

²¹ *Ibid*, n.927, 18/5/1888, p. 2.

*the majority contrived by every possible method to guarantee a majority that today is going to expel Mr Thiakakis from the Assembly.*²²

Within this frame, another representative, Fotakis, in an attempt to become more explicit regarding the accusations against Stavrakis claimed that:

*[...] Taking advantage of his position, [Stavrakakis] was able to fire and hire whoever he wished to. We are all aware of the existence of two main parties in Crete; the governing party and the opposition, although those terms are not accurate.*²³

At that point, Fotakis was interrupted by representative Isihakis, commenting that “those terms were reversed after last year’s elections”.²⁴ This altercation caused an additional intervention, this time from the chairman of the Assembly: “Gentlemen! I must recall you to order. Our parliamentary system does not acknowledge terms of that kind.”²⁵ Clearly, “terms of that kind” were those of “political parties”, “majority/minority”, and “governing/opposition”. The adaptation of this vocabulary shows that, from the mid-1880s onwards, political groups were upgraded to well-structured political parties that alternated in the position of governance or opposition, although such a political model was not legislatively provided for. Moreover, what can be further extracted from the dispute above is that these political groupings were led by specific figures.

The conclusion of the dispute regarding Thiakakis’s election also supports the organizational upgrade of these groupings. When a group of representatives requested that a vote be taken on the issue, numerous other representatives withdrew from the Assembly. Speaking on behalf of the latter group, representative Migiakis stated the following:

*Regarding this case, every law is abused. He [Thiakakis] is forced to leave [the G.A.] only because you have the majority. Even if the majority now has the power to prevail against what is right, it is always what is right that wins in the end. So, you have the majority and you are going to vote against an absolutely legal election, that of Thiakakis. But we are going to clamour and protest because we do not want the next generation, when reading the minutes of this session, to claim that nobody stood up against the unfair acts while they were taking place.*²⁶

The withdrawal of representatives took place in a coordinated manner which reveals that the political groups of the time were operating according to a common, probably predetermined, strategy, followed with discipline by the representatives involved.

Another issue consistently causing disputes within the G.A. and highlighting the emergence of political parties was the election of the G.A.C. members by the representatives. In 1884,

²² *Ibid*, n.815, 13/8/1886, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid*, n.813, 7/8/1886, pp. 3-4.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3.

²⁵ *Ibid*, n.824, 26/11/1886, p. 1.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 2.

47 representatives signed a document proposing specific individuals as members of the G.A.C. The signatories were of both religions and proclaimed themselves “the majority of the General Assembly”.²⁷ This initiative was unprecedented and provoked a long debate. The initial proposal of the “majority” was opposed by an initiative by 15 representatives who signed a letter addressed to the chairman of the G.A., stating, among other things:

*[...] This proposal cannot be accepted by the minority of the Assembly as neutral and in line with its progress and rights. Those signing this vote are standing up against the muzzling of their duty.*²⁸

Among these 15 representatives was Pologeorgakis, who further argued that:

*We are in a defensive position, defending the Law and the rights of the minority. [...] All over the world the majority respects the minority but [in Crete] the majority states: “You do not have the right to your opinion and volition; you are unnecessary and you have to be eliminated”.*²⁹

This statement was answered at length by representative Michelidakis, stating:

*[...] Charges are addressed against the majority [by the] so-called minority [...] as if we are attempting to violate the law [...]. Will the result change if we vote? In the parliamentary bodies some people always remain dissatisfied. This happens in constitutional governments. Everywhere parliamentary ethics are established, the minority cannot always be satisfied. [...] The time will come when the majority will turn into the minority and argue exactly the same as the latter does today.*³⁰

Finally, another representative who signed the petition against the initial proposal, Ioannis Papadakis, stated in even more dramatic tones that:

*We, the minority, will defend our rights to the last drop of our strength in order to secure our rights [...] We do know how to respect the majority’s decision but it is at least the moral duty of the majority to ratify this decision by voting. [...] We, the minority, are defending the Law [...] that is the soul of all progressive nations.*³¹

The peak of this session was the decision of numerous representatives to leave the Assembly in a coordinated manner once again, right after representative Pologeorgakis rhetorically attacked the G.C., stating that “[...] thirty-four representatives were not allowed to vote. Voting is an inalienable right and [should be] respected by those respecting Liberty. Today you are trampling the law by depriving us of the right to vote. We hereby withdraw”.³² The next entry

²⁷ *Ibid*, n.719, 22/8/1884, p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid*, n.720, 24/8/1884, p. 2.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 3.

³⁰ *Ibid*, n.721, 31/8/1884, p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid*, n.722, 4/9/1884, p. 2.

³² *Ibid*, pp. 3-4.

in the minutes of the G.A. was as follows: “Immediately afterwards, some Christian and Muslim representatives left the hall. [...] forty-eight representatives remained [in the G.A.]”.³³

Once again, a group of representatives left the Assembly in a coordinated manner, after a specific representative announced this decision on their behalf. This recurring pattern further supports the fact the political parties were gradually improving their level of organization and discipline. Furthermore, the political debate within the G.A. was monopolized by morally charged statements indicative of the political disputes of the time. The specific mentions of “parliamentary ethics” and more generally the moral code under which the political debates should operate also show that contemporary politicians were deeply engaged with representation, party politics and parliamentarianism. The representatives presented – or even perceived – themselves as being part of a pure and moral political battle; as defenders of what they perceived as “morally right”, acting in accordance with their duty to represent both their voters and the values and ideas adopted by their parties, although these principles were vague and ill-defined.

GENERAL COMMANDERS' INVOLVEMENT IN PARTY POLITICS

The way in which different G.C.s dealt with this new dynamic is also indicative of the emergence of a dominant political scene on the island.³⁴ In his introductory speech as G.C. in 1886, Savvas Pasha stated the following:

We must reexamine our electoral system in order to become of value to the Cretan society. The elections are taking place under circumstances of extreme intensity, usually justified by the preexisting divisions on the island. What is more, if we examine this phenomenon more thoroughly one would say that deep party division exists on the island. This does not come as a surprise; wherever in the world elections take place, electoral disputes and party divisions are born. [...]

Concluding, the G.C. underlined that “We do not recognize parties in Crete” and expressed his “wish and will” for “the mitigation of the intensity of political controversies, [...] or even the final and definitive disappearance of those [parties].”³⁵

Despite these denouncements, as will be shown below, Savvas himself was accused not only of being involved with one of these parties but actually leading it. Savvas was not the only G.C. to face accusations of intervening in local party politics. Between May 1885 and May 1888, three Commanders were forced to resign or were directly removed by the Sublime Porte. Fotiadis Pasha was the first G.C. appointed after the signing of the Halepa Pact. He served for five-and-a-half years and was the only Commander to achieve reelection.³⁶ Nevertheless, Fotiadis was also

³³ *Ibid*, n.724, 18/6/84, p. 4.

³⁴ Ioannis Fotiadis Pasha (20/12/1878-22/5/1885), Savvas Pasha (23/5/1885-1/2/1887), Kostakis Anthopoulos Pasha (3/2/1887-5/1888), Nikolaki Sartinski Pasha (6/6/1888- 16/7/1889).

³⁵ *Ibid*, n.797, 12/4/1886, pp. 2-3.

³⁶ *Ibid*, n.686, 23/2/1884.

the first to be forced to resign.³⁷ After his resignation, Fotiadis was accused – in his absence – in the G.A. by representative Foumis of “intervening beyond any doubt in the relations between the parties, taking advantage of his position, being the legislative power” and “intending to become the head and standard bearer of the one party”.³⁸

Foumis then reminded Fotiadis’s successor, Savvas Pasha, in aggressive tones that in his opening speech as the new G.C. he had committed himself “not to intervene in party politics”; receiving Savvas’s response, “I am also repeating it today”.³⁹ Foumis’s reminder was more than that. It was both a warning and a political challenge, as in the figure of the new G.C. he recognized a potential enemy who might collaborate with the opposing political party, as his predecessor had. Indeed, in the very next G.A. session another representative, Thiakakis, directly accused Savvas, claiming that:

[...] having witnessed specific actions that took place, I have come to the conclusion that you have become the party leader [...]. You are protecting some people while persecuting others. I will explain myself. I have specific evidence, [such as] the behavior of many state officers in my district.

Such strong and direct accusations against the highest officer on the island were unprecedented. Nevertheless, Savvas did not react aggressively and limited himself to stating that: “You are wrong, your belief is mistaken.”⁴⁰

Savvas’s term as G.C. lasted only a year and a half. On 3 February 1887 Kostakis Anthopoulos Pasha was appointed as the new Governor.⁴¹ Both in his opening speech⁴² and through a proclamation published a few months later, Anthopoulos made direct references to “political hatred and disputes” that were “dividing the people of Crete”.⁴³ Despite these rhetorical denunciations, Anthopoulos did not succeed in his proclaimed mission and was forced to resign immediately after the 1888 elections and before the G.A. sessions began.⁴⁴ It was during his term that objections against elected representatives reached their peak, as shown above.⁴⁵ Against a background of intense political rivalry, the G.A. sessions of 1888 were delayed until a new G.C., Nikolaki Sartinski Pasha, was appointed after Anthopoulos’s resignation.⁴⁶ The new G.C. initially adopted a different rhetorical strategy by avoiding any reference to political parties and disputes in his opening speeches in 1888 and 1889.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Sartinski failed to avoid the fate of all the G.C.s of Crete before him and his term of office ended a year later.

³⁷ *Ibid*, n.754, 11/5/1885, p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid*, n.814, 11/8/1886, p. 4.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, n.816, 18/8/1886, p. 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, n.837, 3/2/1887, p. 1

⁴² *Ibid*, n.866, 5/5/1887, pp. 1-3.

⁴³ *Ibid*, n.873, 22/7/1887, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, n.924, 21/4/1888.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, n.931, 5/6/1888, p.2. See above, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, n.925, 6/5/1888, p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, n.926, 14/5/1888, p.1 and *Ibid*, n.1025, 3/5/1889, pp. 1-4.

Regardless of the accuracy of the accusations leveled by representatives against three different G.C.s of intervening in local politics or even manipulating the outcome of the elections, it seems that the politicians of the time shared the belief that their decision-making powers were steadily increasing. Political parties, especially from the mid-1880s onwards, were so dominant that they influenced every field of administration, even at the highest level, the G.C., the direct representative of the Sultan on the island.

G.A. CODE OF OPERATION AND THE DE FACTO RECOGNITION OF POLITICAL PARTIES BY THE SUBLIME PORTE

Although now a reality and at the same time undeniably influencing the shaping of the local central political scene, political parties had not been recognized as such by the end of the 1880s. This mismatch was noted and highlighted by many representatives.

It is during Sartinski's term that we can observe the official recognition of party politics on the island by both the local and the central Ottoman administration. Already from the mid-1880s and especially after 1884, the dominance of party political disputes within the G.A. led representatives of the two parties to propose modifications to the operation of the G.A. These were intended to guarantee the rights of the opposition against a background of intense political polarization and in line with a growing commitment to parliamentary ethics. Although religion was recognized as the only official criterion by which the representatives were distinguished, this did not correspond to contemporary political reality.

References to the need to reform the G.A. Code of Operation in order to protect the rights of the minority side can be noted at least from 1886. More specifically, it was then that representative Fomis provided a rather groundbreaking rereading of the provisions made by the Organic Law:

If we were to decide by voting [regarding the legitimacy of each election], how many [representatives] would remain [in the G.A.]? Only the majority! I declare that the Organic Law is based on the principle that the rights of the minority have to be protected and their participation in office guaranteed.

When a representative attempted to interrupt his speech by stating that "no official parties exist here", Fomis concluded his argument as follows:

They do exist and they are recognized. I am requesting a legal provision guaranteeing freedom of speech for all the participants in the assembly. In all of our committees there is a provision for the participation of Muslims. If we were to vote on their participation, they could be excluded by the [Christian] majority. What I request is a corresponding provision for the [rights of the minority] parties.⁴⁸

Fomis's argument was well aimed, as it explicitly highlighted the need to recognize the new status quo within the Assembly. Although provisions were made to overcome religious distinctions, it was the rights of the opposing political party which were under threat. Given that

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, n.825, 22/11/1886, p. 3.

the two political parties were alternating as the majority of the G.A., the concern to legislate in order to guarantee that the political battle would take place on equal terms was a shared one.

Almost three years later, on 10 July 1889, the G.A. was discussing the amendments to its Code of Operation. As the representatives were discussing a regulation regarding the composition of the G.A. commissions, a vivid dialogue took place. Representative Venizelos made the following argument:

[...] The vote for seats on the committees should be secret. Even if every committee consists of twelve members from the majority and eight from the minority, it is the majority that is still able to exclude the minority. What would then happen if the majority decided to exclude the minority?

Representative Neimvergakis responded by asking the question that every reader of the G.A. minutes would probably seek to pose:

I think that we have to clarify what we mean by the term “minority”; do we mean minority in terms of parties? Because one might argue that we imply [by using the term minority] the Muslims as opposed to the Christians.⁴⁹

This question was immediately answered by the chairman: “The law does not recognize any discrimination on the basis of religion.” Venizelos then completed his initial reasoning by stating that “It should be clearly written in the minutes that the law does not refer to racial divisions but to party ones”.⁵⁰

Although Venizelos’s statement was widely supported by many representatives, Dimitrakakis, a representative of the majority party, attempted to provoke the Assembly by stating that “We will include [in the committees] as many as we want!” This statement was directly opposed by another representative, Foumis, also from the governing party,: “Do you really believe, Mr Dimitrakakis, that we will always be the majority? We have to provide for the future.”⁵¹

As we have shown, several representatives insisted, for consecutive parliamentary years, on a reformation of the G.A. regulations, their main concern being the protection of the minority party’s rights. Although the discussion on the revision of the G.A. Code of Operation was one of the last before martial law was imposed on Crete by the central Ottoman administration in August 1889, it is significant as it was the first time that party politics were officially recognized by the island’s main representative institution.⁵² The definition of the minority as referring not to religious or ethnic divisions but strictly to political ones constituted the last stage of a long process. The term “minority”, which in 1879 was understood as referring to the Muslim representatives as a concrete group, and “majority”, referring to the Christian representatives, were unanimously recognized 10 years later in the most formal way as having political substance and referring to the contemporary political parties.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, n.1055, 10/7/1889, p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, n.1056, 12/7/1889, p. 2.

⁵² *Ibid*, n.1055, 10/7/1889, p. 5.

A few days after the revision of the G.A. Code of Operation, and more specifically during the course of the riots that took place on the island in the summer of 1889, the Sublime Porte sent the following telegram to the G.C.:

*In order to better understand the reasons and the initial target of the riots in Crete, the issue was discussed and a decision was made immediately; his Majesty, our Venerable Master commanded [the following]: a.) two of the leaders of the majority and two of the minority [...] should be sent to Constantinople, b.) his Majesty the General Commander should come to Constantinople in order to be present at the meeting [...]*⁵³

This telegram, sent to the G.C. of Crete during a crucial situation that descended into turmoil, constitutes a de facto recognition of political parties on the island. The central Ottoman administration was not only aware of the existence of two political parties in Crete, but, even more importantly, recognized the representatives of these parties as equal interlocutors at the highest level of administration and power. The terms “majority” and “minority” had, beyond any doubt, political significance and directly referred to the political parties of the time

A statement by representative Foumis in 1886 concludes this transition from religious to political disputes in the most convincing way:

*After the establishment of the Halepa Pact, parties were founded; two groups of Christians and two groups of Muslims respectively. Each party consisted of both Christians and Muslims who shared common principles regarding local problems and common thoughts on electoral and other issues. Regardless of their religion, [the members of both parties] counted on that link for their future. Due to this development, the poison which had caused millions of negative racial and religious discriminations between the two existing communities in Crete, the Muslim and the Christian, settled into a more rational and civilized [conflict].*⁵⁴

⁵³ *Ibid*, n.1060, 7/8/1889, p. 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, n.814, 11/8/1886, p. 3.