

## Coming to Terms with the Past

For the last 50 years Cypriots have been living amid various forms of conflict between political leaders, communities and armed forces. Divisive re-tellings of key moments in these conflicts continue to be important to the politics of all communities on the island. Blame has become an entrenched part of the differences, preventing awareness of others' suffering, and contributing tangibly to the deepening of the divides.

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### TRUTH-TELLING AND RECONCILIATION

The relationship between truth-telling and reconciliation is an intimate one. An honest reckoning with the past in a way that helps dignify all victims in Cyprus can promote the trust necessary to a durable resolution of the Cyprus problem. Such an effort is long overdue in Cyprus, where the two communities have harbored resentment and bitterness. Left unresolved, these troubled relationships have the potential to undermine any political settlement, and to prevent the attainment of real peace.

Truth-telling can take many forms including investigative journalism, citizen-led commissions, criminal prosecutions or civil actions. It may also be achieved through historical inquiry and photographic and documentary film projects. It ideally should lead to an affirmation of rights and an acknowledgment that rights were violated.

Acknowledging the truth contributes to reconciliation by documenting the imperfections of one's own cause, and showing that no side has a complete monopoly on goodness and morality. Truth-telling creates a possibility for dialogue by challenging the "good versus evil" narrative of the struggle and thus encouraging people to share responsibility as well as blame and victimhood.

ICTJ emphasizes that coming to terms with the past can contribute to the emergence of a rights-respecting, stable, democratic society. Though Cyprus is unique, it is not alone in facing up to a difficult and divisive past, and there is much to learn from the experiences of other societies that have experienced mass atrocities and conflict.

Reconciliation is the process of overcoming past enmity and division. It is undertaken to break a cycle of resentment, promote civic trust and bolster the legitimacy of state institutions.

Reconciliation often hinges on taking certain steps to confront past wrongdoing:

- Acknowledgment that certain treatment was wrong. This acknowledgement may take place through truth-telling, public apologies, days of remembrance, reparation, and memorials.
- Making efforts to repair wrong. Differences in country contexts, institutional frameworks, and the availability of resources call for varied approaches to reparations. Reparations can be both material and symbolic. They can take the form of lump-sum payments, pensions, health

benefits, educational scholarships, official apologies, the renaming of public spaces, and the establishment of days of commemoration.

- Collectively remembering past human rights abuses. Memorials can be part of symbolic reparation programs and have become tools of human rights education. They consist of civic spaces that are sites of mourning, and in some cases healing. Through these civic spaces, an ongoing dialogue and discussion on past trauma can be achieved, and diverse opinions, interests, and perspectives can be discussed.
- Sanctioning the individuals most responsible for the wrongs. Such sanctions may take the form of vetting programs or other accountability measures.
- Reforming systems that made the wrongs possible, in order to prevent their recurrence.
- Consulting with those who were wronged in developing these steps is a critically important principle. Reconciliation should ultimately strengthen democracy and peace. These goals are more likely to be reached with active consultation of, and participation by, victims groups and the public. A society's choices are more likely to be effective if they also are based on a serious examination of other societies' experiences as they emerged from a period of abuse.

Since the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s, reconciliation has become an important step for societies trying to come to terms with a history of systematic violence. Several key debates emerged at that time, which remain relevant today. Some South Africans worried about the potential for "false" reconciliation—that the ruling powers would manipulate the process to maintain their own privileges. Others worried about "premature" reconciliation—that the time was not ripe for people to face up sincerely to the wrongs of the past. Still others worried that what people really meant by reconciliation was "forgive and forget."

The South African experience, and reconciliation efforts elsewhere in Africa as well as in Europe, Latin America and North Africa, suggest that reconciliation initiatives must be taken with sensitivity to political realities. It also suggests that public consultation and outreach are crucial to the fate of those initiatives, so that people have realistic expectations about what these initiatives can achieve.

It is important to stress that reconciliation is a multifaceted process—not an outcome. There is no template for achieving it. Taking the steps described above can contribute to a fundamental shift in power relations between groups. This shift, however, is likely to take place over a period of years and decades, and through the actions of many people and institutions. Reconciliation may be an ideal that is never be fully achieved.

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