



Summary :

The presence of Rum (Greek-Orthodox) Members of Parliament from Constantinople in the two periods of the Ottoman parliamentary system (1876-188 and 1908-1919) was strong and very productive with interventions over issues concerning the Greek-Orthodox populations of the Ottoman Empire, such as the representation of ethno-religious groups in the provincial councils, the recruitment of non-Muslims and the autonomy of educational foundations.

Date

1876-1878 and 1908-1919

Geographical Location

Constantinople (Istanbul)

1. The two phases of the Ottoman parliamentary system

The history of the parliamentary system in the late Ottoman Empire is divided into two periods. The first one began on the 23rd of November 1876 with the declaration of the constitution that a group of liberal bureaucrats had elaborated under the grand vizier Midhat Pasha and lasted until the 13th of February 1878, when the sultan Abdulhamid II in front of the threat of the Russian army suspended the parliament and the constitution. During this period, the elections were not conducted normally; instead, the 115 representatives of various prefectures were chosen by the local mixed councils (Meclis-i Umumî). This kind of choice was made two times –one per year.

The second period began with the restoration of the constitution under the pressure of the [Young Turks movement](#) in 1908. This time, normal elections were conducted in October and November of the same year. The parliament began its function in the beginning of December and worked until the spring of 1912, when elections were called under the shadow of the Italian-Ottoman war. In the parliament that emerged from these elections of violence and fraud –known as “elections with the bat” (sopalı seçim)-, the Young Turks’ Committee of Union and Progress won an overwhelming majority. Eventually, the work of this short-lived parliament was interrupted in August of the same year, which would mean the removal of the Young Turks from power. The “coup of the Porte” (Bab-ı Âli baskını) which would follow few months later under the weight of the heavy defeat in the Balkan Wars, would bring the Youth Turks back to the forefront until the end of the First World War. However, the parliament would never regain the prestige of the first years. The elections of 1914 were completely a matter of formality. The work of the Ottoman parliament ended in March 1919 in the midst of the Allied occupation of Constantinople.

2. The presence of the Greek-Orthodox MPs in the Ottoman Parliament

The Greek-Orthodox Members of Parliament participated during both of the phases of Ottoman parliamentary system. In the first parliamentary period which started in 1876 there were recorded 17 Greek MP’s and 15 in the second period. It must be noted that it needs a lot of effort to distinguish the Greek-Orthodox MP’s from the others, since the Ottoman sources refer to Christians, Jews and Muslims MP’s. What makes things more complicated is the fact that in the work of Robert Devereaux,¹ which is fundamental for this period, the distinction is made according to ethnic and not ethno-religious categories. Therefore, the sources refer to Serbian, Bulgarian, even Albanian Orthodox, who were recorded separately, although there was no separate Albanian or Serbian [millet](#) at that time, despite the fact that the Bulgarian Exarchate had been already established. As far as the second parliamentary period is concerned, although the ethno-religious groups were recorded separately, there is always room for confusion, as the records refer to either 23 or 24 Greek MP’s for the first period, but after the elections of 1912 their number decreased to 15.

2.1. Rum MPs for Constantinople during the first period of the Ottoman parliamentary system

In each period, there were elected two MP’s from [Constantinople](#): Nikolakis Souldis and Vasilakis Seragiotis in 1877 and Ioannis



Sismanoglou and Alexandros Sakas (Sakazade) in 1878. In this phase, the capital had a particularity. In the provinces, as it is noted, the choice was made by the local councils, but in Constantinople, where such councils did not exist, the process was divided in two phases: the electors were elected directly by the people in district level and then the MP's were elected by these electors. The 40 electors voted for 3 [Armenians](#), 1 [Jew](#) and 1 Greek-Orthodox – Vasilakis Seragiotis- among the non-Muslims. This was regarded as conspiracy of the Ottoman authorities and the Armenians who had very close relations with the Muslim political leadership during the first parliamentary phase. Finally, as there was a danger that the Greeks would boycott the Parliament, one of the elected Armenians, Dr. Serviçen, was nominated to the Senate and his position in the Parliament was occupied by Christakis Zografos, the personal banker of sultan Abdulaziz. However, Zographos left for Europe before taking office, maybe in order to avoid a research for his exchanges with the sultan, who had been killed. His position was occupied by Nikolakis Soulidis, an unknown banking employee.

Despite the short duration of this parliamentary period, two major debates were conducted in which Vasilakis effendi Seragiotis was involved among other Greek-Orthodox. The first one was about the revision of the provincial administration law (vilayet nizmanamesi) which had been active since 1864. One of its rules provided that in sub-administration level half of the members of the council must be Muslims. When Vasilakis Effendi argued that such a restriction was against the Constitution, the Christian MP Manok Karatza from Aleppo reminded him that in the crisis that had arisen during the elections, the Greek MP's had been elected just on the basis of quota for Muslims and non-Muslims, while the also Christian Roupen from Adrianople reminded him that despite being an innovation for Constantinople, this system worked for many decades and it had never created any problem. Later, Vasilakis effendi was among those who reacted against the ex officio participation of the religious leaders of local communities in the provincial councils. He reacted against the participation of muftis, although their exclusion would mean the exclusion of the clergy too. Nevertheless, it seems that the majority of the Christian MPs didn't share the ideas of Vasilaki Effendi.

Another crucial issue was the enlistment of non-Muslims in the Ottoman army. Although the Constitution did not make a relevant mention, it is reasonable that the declarations about equality and equal duties included this field too. Neither the Muslim nor the Christian leaders were ready to accept something like that. It is indicative that Zafirakis, MP for the islands, stated that Christians were completely inexperienced in the art of war and the state would lose huge revenues from the taxes they paid (bedel-i askeri) in order to be exempt from military service. These issues were discussed in difficult circumstances i.e. when the destructive war –as it proved to be- with Russia had already broken out. Vasilakis effendi, as a staunch supporter of the Christians' enlistment in the Ottoman army, deployed three arguments: a) the joint recruitment during the war would strengthen the unity of the nation, b) the state would have a much bigger army, c) it would inhibit the loss of the Muslims caused by the existing system.

2.2. Rum MPs for Constantinople during the second period of the Ottoman parliamentary system.

When the work of the new Parliament began, after the revolution of 1908, the restoration of the Constitution, and the elections, Konstantinos Konstantinidis and Pantelis Kosmidis were the elected representatives for Constantinople. Kosmidis played a central role in the discussions. Being a member of the Continuing Mixed Council of the Patriarchate, he belonged to the narrow circle of friends of the Patriarch Joachim III, who had supported his candidacy. Simultaneously, he became one of the closest associates of Ion Dragoumis and Souliotis-Nikolaidis, who were leading figures of the [Organization of Constantinople](#), a secret organization initially aiming at countering the Bulgarian threat, that took over the coordination of the moves of the Greek-Orthodox MPs.² The interference of this organization, which was not supported openly by either the Patriarchate or the Greek state, made many MPs discontented; they started to oppose it, but this led to divisions among them. Finally, sixteen of them became members of the Greek Political Association (Ellinikos Politikos Syndesmos) which was renamed Constitutional Political Association (Syntagmatikos Politikos Syndesmos) in 1910 and functioned as the alter ego of the organization. Kosmidis was one of them.³

Once again, the recruitment of non-Muslims was one of the burning issues. Although in general it was accepted that they should serve in the army too and the measure was introduced in 1909, Kosmidis intervened in order to minimize the consequences of such a measure. Therefore, he proposed that the measure should not be applied in 1909, but in the next year, since the tax for exemption (bedel-i askeri) had already been paid. He also proposed that the obligatory service in the Ottoman army should last for two years. The argument that he and other MPs, like Georgis Bousios, used was that the long service would have adverse effects on the economy, since men in productive ages would get inactive. Despite these criticisms, Kosmidis and Bousios embraced the Christians'



recruitment contrary to other MPs, such as Artas, MP for Thessaloniki, who rejected it. According to the “Recruitment Law” (ahziasker kanunu) of 1909, it was necessary that all the “Ottoman people” (efrâd-ı Osmaniye) serve in the army. Kosmidis considered that the Greek-Orthodox belonged to the “Ottoman people”, but Artas did not share this opinion. Finally, it is worth mentioning that in the newspaper *Sada-i Millet* (Voice of the Nation), in which Kosmidis was co-publisher, there were recorded incidences of Christian parents sending their children in the army, even by force, due to their sense of duty toward the fatherland.⁴

Another crucial issue was the effort of the new regime to restrict one of the most important privileges enjoyed by the non-Muslim communities, i.e. the autonomy of educational foundations. During the discussion in the Parliament, Kosmidis took the initiative in forwarding the revision of the related article 16. According to the new formulation, “there must be no encroachments on education linked to the religious beliefs of the various communities”. Kosmidis supported that the formulation should be “there must be no encroachments on the various communities’ education, which have been recognized since centuries”. The basic argument was that in the Greek-Orthodox schools, just as in the Muslim schools, besides the religious lessons, there were geography or philology lessons, which were equally important to the Greeks. In fact, the discussion gave him the opportunity to present his position over the declared aim of the Ottoman unity in the name of which there was an effort toward the homogenization of all the educational systems. Kosmidis stated (a position that probably represented the majority of the Greek Ottomans), that contrary to the Youth Turks, what they had in mind was not an ethnic unity, but a political unity of all the Ottoman ethnic groups. As a result, if the lessons in Greek-Orthodox schools were conducted in Turkish, that would be a violation of the Constitution. When the Muslim MP Nafi pasha commented that if all the communities maintained their program, it would result in the collapse of the Ottoman ideology and that, after all, the majority should decide, Kosmidis answered that these issues should not be regulated on the basis of the majority. In his reference to the Great School of the Nation (Rum Mekteb-i Kebir), from which he had graduated, he expressed anxiety about whether the school could survive after this kind of change.⁵

When the authoritative policy of Young Turks eroded any chance of negotiation, Kosmidis and Konstantinidis played an important role in the effort of rapprochement with the parliamentary groups of other Christian communities in 1911. However, it is worth mentioning that Kosmidis and other Greek-Ottoman Members of Parliament, especially Georgios Bousios, head of the Greek Political Association, seemed to follow an intransigent attitude toward the Young Turk policies.⁶ This fact, which cost them their reelection in 1912, was not irrelevant to the definitive rupture in relations between the contemporary Ottoman governments and the political and religious leadership of the Greek-Orthodox.

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