

The Disappearing Candidates

The 5th of February 2005 was the last day to nominate candidates for that year's round of local council elections, scheduled for twenty-three localities on 12 March. The online edition of the weekly newspaper MaltaToday described the events at the offices of the Electoral Commission that evening -

It was ten to seven. The electoral commission was planning to close. PN official Henri Darmanin suddenly appeared and informed the commission, that Matthew Frendo, Manwel Saliba, Lawrence Grixti and Joseph Brownrigg were being withdrawn. The commission officials looked on in disbelief aware that this would mean that there would be no election in these two Labour dominated councils [of Marsa and Zejtun]. ...

The MLP secretary general froze, he understood that they had been had, and in no way could he muster more Labour candidates to call an election in such a short time. He fumed and lifted the phone to inform [party leader] Alfred Sant of the latest development.

Obviously no competitive election need be held when the number of candidates equals the number of seats to be filled. The PN maneuver of withdrawing some of their candidates resulted in a Marsa council of 6 MLP and one PN councilor while Zejtun's council would comprise 8 members from MLP and one from the PN.

With now only one seat in each of these two councils, this meant that the PN actually registered a decline in its representation, having had two seats on each of those localities since 2002. They might well have replicated that result in a 2005 election; but winning seats was obviously subordinate to other considerations.

Some candidates whose nominations were withdrawn claimed initially that it was for personal reasons. But soon after, PN headquarters explained that it had actually been a "strategic" decision. Although the reasons for the "strategic" decisions were not given, the strategy was rather clear - it was to diminish the overall MLP vote percentage for the 2005 round of elections.

The political parties pay much attention to these percentages after each election and invoke them to claim increased popular support for themselves or deteriorated percentages for their opponents.

How, then, did the withdrawal of candidates in Marsa and Zejtun, and the consequent lack of an election, affect the overall vote shares of the two parties, from the 2002 to the 2005 round of elections?

There were 84,692 registered voters in the localities of the 2002 round of elections; of these 4,460 (5.3%) lived in Marsa and 8,815 (10.4%) in Zejtun. Significantly, these two localities then provided almost a quarter (22%) of all the MLP votes in this group of localities. The impact of these two communities on the parties' respective vote shares was therefore substantial.

Vote Percentages in the 2002 and 2005 Rounds of Local Elections				
	All Localities		Excluding Marsa & Zejtun	
	2002	2005	2002	2005
MLP	52.25	56.16	48.49	53.35
PN	44.85	41.51	48.06	43.86
Others	2.90	2.33	3.45	2.79
<i>Hypothetical</i>				

*The column with hypothetical percentages assumes that the 2002 vote distributions in Marsa and Zejtun would have prevailed unchanged in 2005.
There was no competitive election in Fontana in 2002 and that locality is therefore excluded from all computations.*

The group of localities scheduled for elections in 2002, and again in 2005, had an MLP majority. As the Table above shows, in the 2002 election the MLP received an overall total of 52.25% of the valid votes in this group of localities. If Marsa and Zejtun had been excluded in 2002, the MLP's vote share would only have been 48.49% in that year. When these two towns were actually excluded in 2005, the MLP gained 53.35% of the votes – a gain of 4.50% over the 2002 comparable results.

On the other hand, when one compares the MLP percentage of 52.25% for all localities in 2002 with the all-except-Marsa-and-Zejtun result in 2005 -- the comparison most favorable for the PN -- then the increase for the MLP amounts to only a trivial 0.25%. The architects of the withdrawal strategy presumably had in mind the promotion of just such a comparison.

But if one assumes that elections had actually taken place in Marsa and Zejtun in 2005, with the vote distribution they had in 2002, then the hypothetical result would yield about a four percent gain for the MLP and a corresponding loss for the PN.

Repeat Performance?

In a March 5 news conference the Prime Minister, reacting to criticism of the candidate withdrawals, said that on previous occasions it had been the Labour Party which limited the number of candidates so that no election would take place in a locality. He did not offer the names of such localities, nor did any of the attending journalists appear to have asked for specifics.

There were indeed eleven earlier instances in nine localities, most of which were small villages in Gozo, where no election was held because the number of candidates equaled the number of available seats: Fontana (1999 and 2002); Ghasri (1999); Kercem (1998); Kirkop (1996); Munxar (1998); Qala (1998); Pieta (1997); Safi (1998 and 2001); and San Lawrenz (1998).

In none of these earlier instance, however, was there a strategic withdrawal of announced candidates at the last minute of the nomination stage.

A lack of sufficient number of candidates to require an election is thus not unprecedented. It is noteworthy that in local elections the parties tend to offer relatively few candidates (in contrast to national elections where over-nomination is the rule). But a dearth of candidates that can be explained by such factors as apathy or disinclination is clearly distinguishable from the tactic of a last-minute withdrawal of individuals who had already formally announced and filed their candidacies.

The reactions in the press to the PN's decision to avoid an election in Marsa and Zejtun were (except in the party's own newspapers) almost unanimously negative, with talk of "cowardice" and "manipulation." In light of such hostile reactions to the 2005 strategy, it is unlikely to be repeated.