



# I focus

michael briguglio

Dr Michael Briguglio  
is a Sociologist and  
Senior Lecturer at the  
University of Malta.

[www.michaelbriguglio.com](http://www.michaelbriguglio.com)

## PL/PN crossroads

The past weeks of hospital controversy have been rather problematic for the Labour Government, whilst windows of opportunity were opened for the Nationalist Opposition. Indeed, the latest MaltaToday survey (March 12) was the worst ever for the erstwhile durable Labour Government, though it has to be seen whether the Nationalist Party will be able to further close the gap, or even emerge on top.

**O**f course many things can happen in the meantime: If the past shows us a glimpse of the future, we can expect quite a lot of hurly burly up until the next general election, which is due in four years time.

In this short article, I would thus like to discuss some of the challenges being faced by the two major parties.

The Labour Government, fresh from its record electoral victory, a relatively successful Covid strategy and amidst war in Ukraine, is now caught between a political rock and a hard place, courtesy of the court judgement on the hospitals case. Steward's appeal and further possible legal avenues, including at a European level, can change the legal course of the matter. But I doubt that the political controversy will end.

Prime Minister Robert Abela seems to have to choose between being resolute through concrete action against the rot, and defending the interests of the Joseph Muscat triumvirate which had been responsible for the hospitals deal. Let us keep in mind that Muscat remains a very strong figure in the Labour Party, but at the same time, the party's electoral success rests on a broad coalition which, according to the latest MaltaToday survey, has faced a dip in support.

Let us go back to December 2019, when, confronted by a wave of civil society protests, as well as possible internal and external pressure which was not necessarily covered in the press, the up-till-then invincible Muscat had to resign from Prime Minister. It should be noted that, during the crisis, Muscat had already started to lose his shine, and according to a survey published by *it-Torca* on December 1, he had become less popular than the Labour Party – in itself a very meaningful statistic. Hence, it could be the case that within Labour, Prime Minister Muscat was being considered a political liability.

Fast forward to March 2023, and it is interesting to see whether Labour views Muscat as vital or not for its own position in Government. Here, the various messages given by different personalities and factions in Labour's movement could be rather significant. It also has to be seen whether key figures involved in the Hospitals scandal



will remain united, or ultimately break ranks in order to save their own skin.

In the meantime, the Labour government can resort to various options to keep its electoral advantage.

Its power of its incumbency can serve well here, as will divide-and-rule tactics aimed at its adversaries. Labour will obviously do everything in its power to keep the economic treadmill growing, even at the expense of longer-term societal needs. To date, Labour has been astute and effective in maintaining a winning-formula, even creating opportunities out of adversity.

As regards the Nationalist Party, the hospitals controversy is acting as a cause for internal unity that had been absent for years. This immediately brings certain challenges to the fore. First, whether this unity is a fragile marriage of convenience, or

whether it is something more stable. Second, whether the PN can keep the momentum, whilst presenting itself as a credible alternative government. Here it needs to win the hearts and minds of Malta's electorate, and this does not happen simply by assuming that one is 'right' or 'true'. In crude terms, the PN needs to become the choice of a majority of voters with different interests, aspirations and affiliations, thus forming a broad and relatively stable movement greater than the one currently keeping Labour in power.

Such a movement must include not only voices who have influence in the public sphere, but also the silent majorities who are not on the news headlines.

Which brings me to the 'third party' question. Some commentators are dubbing the relatively high number of persons declaring that they will not vote or that

they are undecided whom to vote for, as the new 'Third Party'. I believe this analysis is analytically incorrect, because a political party is an actually existing organisation that contests elections, and not a hypothetical force based on one's personal wishes. The thousands of voters in question may have different motivations and goals for their declared intentions but, as things stand, voting for actually existing third parties – such as ADPD which, in the meantime, is consistently active – has not been their choice.

Thus, as things stand, with all our organisations, groups, and voices in Malta's rich tapestry of civil society, the numbers show that the only force big and broad enough to replace Labour in Government is the Nationalist Party. Next year's local and European elections may further give us a clearer snapshot.