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Another Labour victory?

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In a way, this article replicates the main arguments in my article entitled 'Is Malta facing a political rupture?' which appeared in the *The Malta Independent* on 5 March 2020.

Back then, I engaged with recent surveys carried out by the Eurobarometer, Malta Today and It-Torċa, respectively. Whereas the former may have given hope to those who aspire to see a shift in Malta's political system, the latter two surveys suggested that this was not the case. Fast forward to 2021 and we are practically in the same situation. I henceforth reiterate what I said a year ago, namely that the *Labour and Nationalist Parties are the only two parties with significant presence on Malta's electoral map, albeit being characterised by a large difference between the two parties which has been the case since 2009.*

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Interesting data from the Eurobarometer published early in 2020 saw that trust in police had declined to 59%, but that this institution enjoyed more trust by the public than the written press (28%), the internet (35%), online social networks (25%), political parties (29%), the justice/legal system (45%) and television (45%). The Army was trusted by 71% of respondents, whilst 51% trusted the government, 44% trusted parliament and 53% trusted the European Union. Back then, and before the Covid-19 pandemic, 92% were satisfied with their life, and the most important issue identified by respondents was migration at 62%. Percentages on satisfaction on the workings of democracy and on positive perception of the country had declined, but still represented a majority of respondents.

The respective Malta Today and Torċa surveys confirmed that Labour's power bloc was on solid ground and that there was a significant gap between the parties: According to the Torċa survey, carried out by University colleague Vince Marmara, Labour had 55% support compared to the PN's 42%.

One pandemic later, and still in the midst of its various impacts, Malta's Eurobarometer latest survey, published a few days ago, showed that 58% of Maltese respondents trust the police, whilst the health sector commanded an impressive 85%. Only 25% of respondents said they trust the political parties, whilst 35% said they trusted the legal system. Trust in the army remained at 71%, government was trusted by 49%, parliament by 46% and the European Union by 64%.

An increased but still relatively low 44% said they trusted the written press, whilst 51% said they trust the media to provide trustworthy information, and only 25% believe that the media provide information free from political and commercial pressure. 78% of respondents believe that they often come across news or information that they believe misrepresents reality or are even false.

MaltaToday and It-Torċa have also published surveys in the recent days. Last month, the latter stated that Labour enjoys a 10% majority over the Nationalist Party, with the former polling at 54.2%, the latter at 44.2% and ADPD or other parties polling 1.6%.

Last weekend's MaltaToday survey concluded that Labour was ahead by 39,000 votes. In sum, the PL has been in an electoral majority since 2009, and despite the internal and external, the crises and controversies it faced, it is quite clearly cruising towards another victory. Of course, we cannot predict what will happen in the coming open

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message of unity and cooperation at this juncture, rather than sulk on the budget amid a global crisis. Similarly, I think it is a strategic mistake to equate Robert Abela's government with Joseph Muscat's. Sure, there is continuity and there is a lot to criticise, but various changes took place which need to be recognised, at least if one is objective.

Second, judging by the revelations in last week's joint Press Release signed by Adrian Delia and Jason Azzopardi, it clearly transpires that a main reason which mobilized elements within the PN and their allies to oust Adrian Delia from leader, was based on deceitful spin. I have no idea whether Bernard Grech was involved in the accusations which now, according to Jason Azzopardi, are not true, but to me there was a cloud of bad faith in the ousting of Delia. Incidentally, such tactics were also used against Parliamentarians, candidates, officials, and activists who respected the internal democratic result of 2017 which led to Delia's leadership of the Party.

Of course, Delia's leadership had its own problems and there was a huge gap between the PN and PL during this period, but it is also true that the party was back then more engaged with factional infighting than focusing on offering an alternative government. One needn't be a political scientist to ask that if such bad faith tactics were employed against PN's 'own', how can one expect good faith towards 'outsiders'?

Third, PN is once again prioritising a non-majoritarian electoral narrative, and a sense of political entitlement keeps haunting various elements within the party. I humbly propose that it should adopt the 'verstehen' (tr. 'to understand') approach proposed a century ago by sociologist Max Weber. It should try to put itself in the shoes of voters who can make or break governments: floaters, undecided, disillusioned, and first-time voters, among others.

True, this is a difficult task, especially when Malta's political system encourages PL and PN to be 'catch all' parties to win majorities. This is bound to result in compromise and contradictions, especially when trying to reconcile the aspirations of different voters. But at the end of the day, this is the art of politics, at least if one aspires for electoral victory. One may query whether such an approach means trading one's principles. In reply, I state that both PN and PL were electorally successful when they managed to construct broad coalitions, which in turn, were characterised by ideological pluralism under the respective party's tent. At this stage it is not clear what the PN stands for, whilst most voters keep preferring the proverbial devil that they know.

Dr Michael Briguglio is a sociologist and senior lecturer at the University of Malta

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