

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A SEA

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A deep furrowed brow. Something was troubling my friend studying in the UK while discharging his weekly priestly duties in his local parish. He had been informed that the last flight coming to Malta would leave the following week. His choice: stick it out with his flock with the risk that if he were to be sick and things take a turn for the worse, he would die alone away from his family and friends, or come back to Malta and serve his parish in exile while finishing his studies here. A tough choice; he came back.

And yet the migrants currently stranded out at sea were not afforded the luxury of this heart-wrenching choice. Returned to a well-documented situation of torture and inhumane treatment, some of them not making it all the way back home. I was left to wonder, why was my Maltese born, Maltese speaking, Maltese looking (do we have a look?), Maltese passport wielding friend offered a flight, quite literally opening the airport for him and his abroad-staying ilk while the other migrants were left out, some to drown or disappear?

I can already hear the battle-cries from all those who seek to defend Malta's sanctity. Why should we take care of them? We have been abandoned by the EU. We are in a medical crisis. It's all the fault of those money-grabbing NGOs who provide a ferry service. Why don't they solve their own problems at home (in certain instances, facing certain death or inhuman treatment, even if others could be more opportunistic economic migrants). Why don't you keep them at your house if you are so in love with them? Malta for the Maltese. We are overrun. We have no space. Resources are limited. The economy is failing, etc. etc.

And I must admit that some of these arguments do hold water. It is not a normal time, resources are scarce. Solidarity is more extinct than the dinosaurs, in this field. The EU is nowhere to be seen and I wonder whether the NGOs are solving an immediate problem only to create a larger one, much like giving a drug addict drugs to temporarily abate symptoms of withdrawal only for these symptoms to come back stronger and the dose required larger, instead of working towards the underlying causes.

I have no solutions, however, as a community researcher within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing who looks at constructed identities within communities, the contrast was too stark not to notice. On the one hand, a piece of paper claiming you are Maltese or a resident entitled you to one of the most comfortable flights of your life to Malta. A black/brownish skin and a debated reason for leaving Libya, on the other hand, was almost a surefire misadventure which at best resulted in a return to the place you so desperately left and at worst, death.

Constructed identities always serve political purposes to obtain power, organise it or gain access to resources. At their most successful, we barely question them. I mean isn't it obvious that being born in Malta makes you Maltese? And yet why do we celebrate Pete Buttigieg's alleged connection to Malta yet doubt whether biracial persons truly are Maltese? But what is it to be a Maltese really, to speak a language, to look a certain way, to be born somewhere? And so on, the discussion goes. But at their worst, identities fail to normalize the power

struggles they are masking. In which world does a piece of paper claiming your country of residence decide whether you get a first-class flight, with few passengers, to bring you back to Malta or potentially drown in the Mediterranean? Even if, realistically, the chances of having contracted Covid-19 are actually higher (at that point Africa had a much lower rate of infection than Europe and the US, where most of the ex-pats on the flight came from), the Maltese government lauded by the Maltese population was ready to risk hospital beds and mass community for a piece of paper.

And so that makes me question, in a tense and volatile environment, can Maltese leadership use this crisis to be rid of the shackles of international law and morality, and in so doing win the home vote? Is this the crisis where we get to take off the European and internationalistic make up we have tiredly sought to cake our face with? Is this the moment where we will make desperate and misguided sea crossers choose between a rock.... and a sea?