

Is Malta embracing activism?

Daphne Caruana Galizia

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Thousands of demonstrators have taken to the streets of Valletta in recent weeks. Photo: Jonathan Borg

Thousands of people have taken to the streets demanding the immediate resignation of the Prime Minister and for all those involved in the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia to be brought to justice. But does this actually show a shift in the nation's mentality that will lead to stronger activism? **Claire Caruana** spoke to long-time activists Andre Callus and Michael Briguglio.

Protesters' voices have never echoed through the streets of Valletta as often as they have in recent weeks, with demonstrations in Malta's capital held almost daily.

Thousands continue to lend their voice, demanding justice over the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia.

Yet, Moviment Graffiti's Andre Callus, an activist who has organised and participated in countless protests, fears people in Malta are still mostly reluctant to take to the streets.

"People are angry right now, God forbid they weren't, and so it is a bit difficult to compare these protests to those in the past because the situation is an exceptional one.

"But while we might be heading towards having more people realising the importance of speaking up, I think more needs to be done," Mr Callus told The Sunday Times of Malta when contacted.

He also pointed to a certain level of fear that tended to hold people back. While they might agree with the activists' cause, groups of people often failed to actually turn up at protests. But what do these people fear, especially since most manifestations organised in connection with calls for justice have been peaceful.

Mr Callus said it was not potential trouble that kept people away but they are more concerned about ramifications in their private lives as a result of their association with certain causes.

"In Malta, unfortunately, things tend to always be seen as being partisan and issues that are political are almost a taboo. People are concerned about being labelled one way or another if they show up," Mr Callus said.

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He also believes there are thousands who are angry at the current situation in Malta, yet they still fail to join demonstrations.

Mr Callus admitted he has seen more youths involved, saying he hoped those who are making their voice heard over this issue will continue to speak up when other issues crop up in future.

“We will have to wait and see if this sentiment will continue over other problems that will occur in the future,” he said.

Graffiti surprised security officers and organised a sit-in protest at Auberge de Castille last Monday.

Sociologist and former politician Michael Briguglio, who has also been behind a number of large protests in the past, shares Mr Callus’s views. While it is clear there has been a greater frequency of protests in recent weeks, he said the country has a history of organising important protests and manifestations.

Insisting he was not dismissing the importance of the recent protests in any way, saying protestors were right to keep taking to the streets, people in Malta have historically always made their voice heard.

“A big difference today, apart from socio-political changes however is that activism can be at once both digital and physical and so we have more opportunity to speak up,” Dr Briguglio said.

While some people still do not physically turn up to the protests, many were still part of the cause through other forms of activism. This, he said, was also significant to note especially in light of the fact that the issues sparking the protests were linked to the murder of journalist who was killed because of what she wrote.

Despite this, Dr Briguglio still believes it is not a correct narrative that people in Malta have suddenly “started waking up”.

However, he said, it was also crucial to acknowledge a certain shift in people’s mentality as more civil society organisations are set up.

“Political parties don’t seem to realise that they do not always have a hold on everyone and there are now more civil society organisations than ever before which could bring about change in the way activism in Malta works,” Dr Briguglio said.

Police minister on protests

Since the first few protests started being held in November, the police presence during demonstrations has been dramatically stepped up, with scores of officers lined up against steel barriers.

The Sunday Times of Malta asked Home Affairs Minister Michael Farrugia about this and why he was concerned about violence when the demonstrations have so far been peaceful ones. “In strong democracies such as Malta’s, there is absolutely no doubt that everyone has the right to protest and manifest their opinions. Likewise, everyone has the right to walk around and enjoy the capital city and elsewhere safely with their families and kids,” a spokeswoman for the minister said.

All must be done within the parameters of the law, she said, and in any case, “nobody has the right to provoke, and nobody should fall for that provocation”.

“In the most recent happenings, some protestors, as opposed to other genuine ones, did in fact resort to violence, abuse and incitement.

“All people of good will would acknowledge that one does not need to use aggressive behaviour and obscene language to protest. As in any other civil society, local authorities are expected to take necessary steps against crime and security breaches to protect both the general public and the protestors and to avoid injuries, assaults and other unwarranted situations.” Organisers have repeatedly contested claims that the protests have been violent in any way.

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