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## The politics of the hospital controversy

Michael Briguglio

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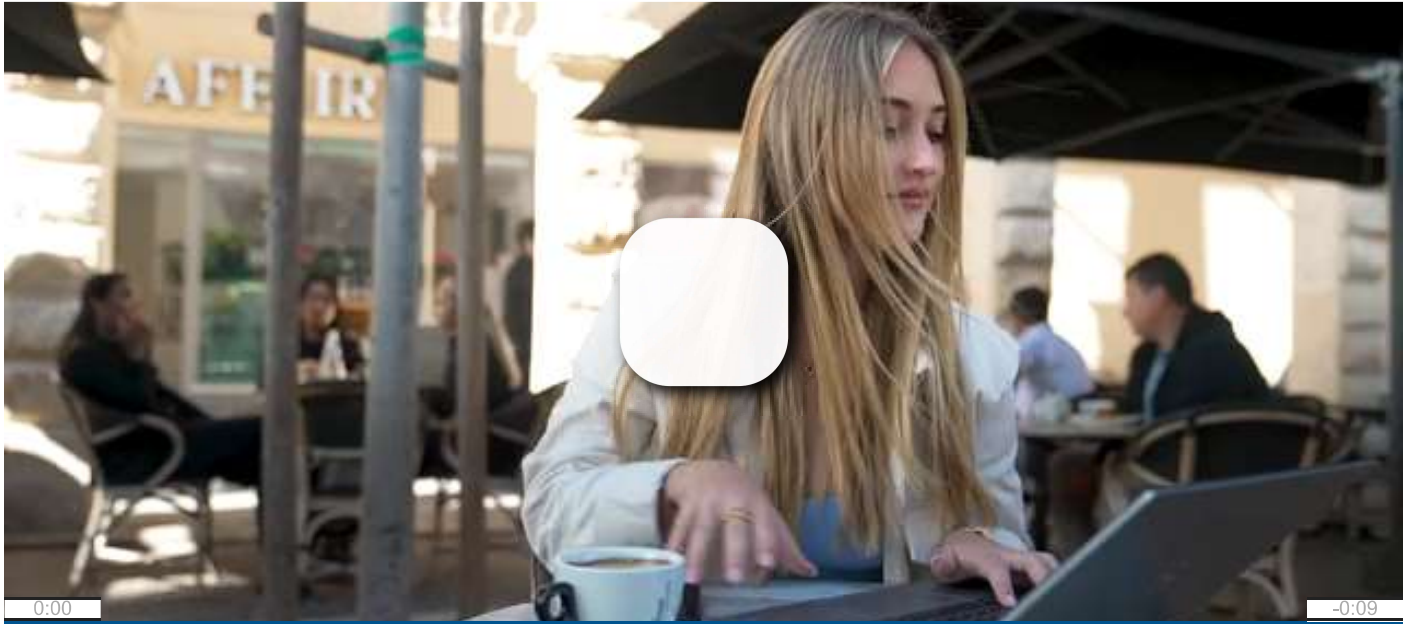
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Last Sunday the Nationalist Party held its second protest following a court judgement to annul the public-private deal on 3 hospitals in Malta, which, to date, had cost well over €300 million from public coffers. The court case had been opened by Adrian Delia back in 2018, when he was Leader of the Opposition.

This time around, the protest was bigger, and was officially supported by UHM – Voice of the open ers. Another trade union, the Malta Association of Medics, has also been consistently critic

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In the meantime, as this controversy kept developing three years ago, Malta – and the world – had been experiencing the first weeks of Covid-19. The surreal ambience at that time was not confined to Covid-19, but also incidentally to the fact that Delia, despite being PN leader, was snubbed by some key figures within his same party when he was speaking up about this matter, thus denting the then political potential of the case. What is also significant is that though some voices in the public sphere were also crying foul on the matter, others, which are usually vociferous on a plurality of erstwhile important issues, have been comparatively timid on this matter, despite its national significance. Some issues are more equal than others, and sometimes – or often - this depends on one's affiliations and/or prejudices.

Back then I was one of the few who was arguing (for example in my blog) for safeguarding the common good, rather than sectoral interests, on this important matter. But as I stated above, apparently, many preferred other pastures in their mobilization or lack of it. We now know that had it not been for the persistence of Adrian Delia, the issue might have been elbowed out of the public sphere.

Now that the Court reached its verdict, what shall be done on these three hospitals? Prime Minister Robert Abela has declared that should the court judgement be adjudicated, following a possible appeal, the government will “explore avenues to protect the national interest in the best possible way.”

Leader of the Opposition Bernard Grech is in the meantime insisting that the government should sue Stewart to get back the millions paid to the company. Here, it is pertinent to note that, as Adrian Delia stated last Sunday, had the whole contract been effected the concessionaires would have received €4,000 million.

In the meantime, writing in the Malta Independent on Sunday, Kevin Aquilina (the former dean of open faculty of Law at the University of Malta) suggested the setting up of a board of inquiry to investigate the whole deal.

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PN goes, last Sunday's protest may have helped the party heal its rather fresh wounds related to internal conflicts and the ousting of Adrian Delia. The challenge for the PN is to see whether it can create a wave from this issue, possibly leading to a cycle of political contention demanding change. For this to happen, I believe that both the party itself, and other political/social forces need to reach out and be ready to work together on this specific issue, and possibly on other matters too. Maltese political and social movement history is full of examples of successful campaigns (including electoral ones and referenda) which were characterised by broad coalitions that included the involvement of major political party actors.

Despite Labour's huge advantage over the PN in terms of electoral preferences, the logic of numbers makes it more than clear that it is only the PN which can construct an alternative government. Hence the importance of thinking in terms of broad coalitions, rather than narrow interests.

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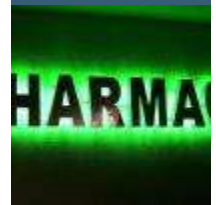
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