

A HISTORY OF MALTA'S POLITICAL PARTIES (1800–1971) – 1

Political parties in Malta may be said to begin about a century ago in the 1880's. Committees, groups, factions and alignments that existed before this date, especially during the time of the Italian *risorgimento*, did not have the character of parties. But after the increased strategic importance of Malta following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the unification of Italy, at a time when great power rivalry in the Mediterranean and elsewhere became known as "the new imperialism", more defined rival groupings emerged to contest political elections as parties. These had a manifesto, a recognisable leadership and base of support, party organs in the form of newspapers. They made electoral battle in the name of the party: candidates

contested elections no longer as individuals but as party candidates.

Briefly, there were two parties: the so-called Reform Party and the so-called Partito Antiriformista (or Anti-Reform Party). The former was reformist in an anglophile direction, the latter conservative in a patriotic sense. The difference between the parties may be gleaned to some extent from the different type of leader or mentor each had.

Sigismund Savona (1837–1908), the son of a box office attendant who had joined the Royal Malta Fencible Artillery just after finishing school, hailed from Valletta. He became a private, soon enough a sergeant in the army and subsequently won a rare scholarship to the Royal

A typical colonial scene outside the Main Guard, Valletta.





By Courtesy of Dr. H. Frendo

Military Asylum in Chelsea where he came first in the final examinations.

On returning to Malta, Savona became the regiment's schoolmaster. Leaving the British army in 1865, he started a newspaper called *Public Opinion* and in 1875 successfully contested the election to the Council of Government as a liberal patriot. By this time he had set up his own school, specializing in the teaching of English.

His rival, on the other hand, was a lawyer, the son of a magistrate, whose family hailed from the island of Gozo. Dr. Fortunato Mizzi (1844–1905) had not studied abroad, being a lawyer in the best Italo-Maltese legalistic and literary traditions. He was married to a woman of Italian descent.

Savona and Mizzi even as individuals represented two social classes and indeed two movements of direction in the colonial context: one, the child of a dynamic of change, the other, the heir to bourgeois tradition. If Savona may be accused of expediency, Mizzi may be criticized for procrastination.

The situation was already in those early days an extreme one, and the leaders of the two main parties and currents of thought embodied much of what was becoming in Malta as a fortress/colony by the 19th century.

Reformism meant change: change from which the bourgeoisie did not stand to benefit; but also change which often enough was mainly in the colonial power's interests as opposed to those of the nation (as seen by the educated section of the population).

Antireformism meant resistance: resistance to domination, to interference, to opportunism and to change itself as well. Perhaps the most illuminating (if equivocal) instance was provided by the suggestion of an English radical and atheist, Francis Rowsell in 1878, when he recommended the abolition or reduction of the corn duty, the largest single source of revenue of the colony's exchequer. Revenue derived from wheat would have to be substituted by revenue from other

Sigismund Savona (1837–1908)

sources of income, possibly including direct taxes. Savona was one of the few Maltese public figures who openly supported this reform.

The attempt to assimilate the native population by means of anglicization and hence de-italianization, was more complex and pregnant with implications. On the other hand, however, many who had no education reasoned that they would stand to benefit more from a smattering of English than from some knowledge of Italian, which had been the language of education in Malta (of schools and university, the courts, the Church curia, of commerce) for centuries.

The battle lines of reformism and antireformism were clearly laid out by the 1880 general election, and no keen observer of the Malta situation can fail to see their significance even today. On the one hand you had the interest in Malta as a British fortress and naval station, with all the sideline advantages that this brought to material conditions: prospects of employment in the harbours or with the Services for the commoner, and hence an obsequiousness to, if not also an admiration for the British overlords.

On the other hand you had the interest in Malta as a potential nation with a middle class morality as evident in cultural affinities (and possibly political links in future) with Italy. The utilitarian standpoint was opposed to the nationalist.

A strict marxist would naturally seek to interpret the history of Maltese political parties according to dialectic class conflicts and antagonisms: he would identify parties with classes and classes with economic interests.

A historical evaluation of the particular situation – in this case Malta – may be said to fit only to some extent into such supposedly universal laws as laid down in conventional marxist dogma. No doubt, there were conflicts between one class and another: the point is however that these “classes” were not so much the rich as opposed to the poor, the capitalists as opposed to the disinherited of the earth.

Dr. Fortunato Mizzi (1844–1905)



By Courtesy of Fr. F. Mizzi



Savona in top hat can be seen addressing the crowd at one of his meetings on the Granaries in Floriana.

It would seem that big business and even a sizeable portion of the landed aristocracy together with the bulk of the proletariat – in a small island fortress such as Malta was, where a very large proportion of employment (e.g. in the dockyard) was government-given – tended to support the colonial master, whom they saw as a guarantee of their livelihood or of their profits or privileges. Many workers preferred Britain to another potential master, whether foreign (Italy) or local (the nobility, the commercial bourgeoisie). This is understandable in a narrowly materialistic sense, but in the colonial context it may actually seem as an anti-national position.

It was partly this utter dependence on British jobs and patronage, whether direct or indirect, that deprived the Maltese nationalists from a strong working-class base. There were other reasons. First of all, there was the peculiar language situation. Educated people read and wrote in Italian and had a contemptuous regard for the native tongue, which they thought was an Arabic dialect, unsuited and useless for educational purposes.

Then there was the often high flown language of politics: constitutionalism was hardly the main preoccupation of the man in the street. An empty head rested comfortably on a full stomach; moreover if the stomach emptied it would take time for the head to realise what to do, if anything. The party division took on this insidious aspect of “educated” versus “uneducated” parties; the former resisting, the latter accommodating the colonial regime and its agents. This much can be stated as a generalisation; there were exceptions on both sides.

Another feature of party development in Malta, since the earliest beginnings, was polarisation on a bi-party bias. It was usually those for and those against, the pro-party and the anti-party, hardly ever any in-betweens coloured in shades of grey. As the Maltese proverb says: *jew nejja jew mahruqa* (either raw or burnt). We can trace this symptom right down the line from the 1880s to the present day.

HENRY FRENDO