

THE DAPHNE PROTESTS AT THE END OF 2019. A CHRONOLOGY

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Abstract:

This article deals with the escalation of protests in Malta concerning the murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia at the end of 2019. The well-attended protests continued the trend of civil society activism since the murder of the journalist in 2017. They were characterised by the creation of abroad coalition of social movement organisations, and the eventual resignation of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat.

Keywords: Malta, Daphne Caruana Galizia, Civil Society, Joseph Muscat

Resumen: Este artículo trata de la escalada de protestas a finales de 2019 en Malta en torno al asesinato de la periodista Daphne Caruana Galizia. Las nutridas protestas fueron la continuación de las tendencias activistas de la sociedad civil desde el asesinato de la periodista en 2017. Se caracterizaron por la creación de una amplia coalición de organizaciones de movimientos sociales en el extranjero, y condujeron finalmente a la dimisión del primer ministro, Joseph Muscat.

Palabras clave: Malta, Daphne Caruana Galizia, sociedad civil, Joseph Muscat

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Resum: Aquest article tracta de l'escalada de protestes a finals de 2019 a Malta al voltant de l'assassinat de la periodista Daphne Caruana Galizia. Les nodrides protestes van ser la continuació de les tendències activistes de la societat civil des de l'assassinat de la periodista l'any 2017. Es van caracteritzar per la creació d'una àmplia coalició d'organitzacions de moviments social a l'estranger, i van portar finalment a la dimissió del primer ministre, Joseph Muscat.

Paraules clau: Malta, Daphne Caruana Galizia, societat civil, Joseph Muscat

The Maltese Context

Malta is the southernmost, smallest and most densely populated EU member state. Indeed, the Maltese islands have a land area of just 316 km² and a population around 500,000. Its democratic parliamentary system is dominated by 2 parties, the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party, and Labour has been in power since 2013, winning two consecutive general elections in the process. The Nationalist Party was in power for 25 years before that, with the exception of a 22-month Labour government between 1996 and 1998. Labour has cemented a considerable majority of votes in all General, European and Local elections since 2009 (Briguglio, 2016). Surveys held after the 2017 general election and the 2019 European and local elections confirm this trend (Europe Elects, 2021).

Malta shares political characteristics of other small states, namely strong connections between individual leaders and their constituents, a limited private sphere, the limited role of ideology and programmatic policy debate, strong political polarisation, the ubiquity of patronage, and the capacity to dominate all aspects of public life (Corbett and Veenendaal, 2018; Veenendaal, 2019), and is considered to be a democracy, albeit facing challenges, by international indicators such as Bertelsmann Stiftung (2020),



Freedom House (n.d.), Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) (2020), and the Economist Intelligence Unit, which relegated Malta to a ‘flawed democracy’ in 2019, ranking 26th overall in the world from 165 countries and 2 territories. Malta’s score, 7.95, was its lowest ever (2019). In particular, Malta’s Prime Minister had too many powers, something that was noted by the Venice Commission (Briguglio, 2019).

The 2019 Daphne Protests

During 2019, Malta was characterized by significant economic growth, and migration was consistently the major concern of voters, according to Eurobarometer surveys (Malta Today, 2020c).

Then Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, who had been leading Labour since 2008 and was first elected Prime Minister in 2013, was consistently enjoying popularity, but there were strong indications that he was preparing to quit from his role, which was often referred to as a 10-year project. There were also rumours that he was seeking a top EU position. This did not take place and Muscat subsequently said that the upcoming October 2019 budget for 2020 would not be his last one. During the year, Labour won the European (and local) elections by a considerable margin, even though there was a relatively low turnout, for example of 72.7 per cent in the former—which is high by Maltese standards (Pace and Carammia, 2019)

During this period, Malta’s news headlines often featured the after-effects of the assassination of Nationalist-leaning journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, a harsh critic of Labour and its governance, but who had also recently been critical of the new Nationalist leader Adrian Delia, who had just been democratically elected in his post in 2017. Caruana Galizia, whose blogs ranged from investigative journalism exposing corruption to tabloid-style gossip, was murdered on 16 October 2017 by means of a car bomb.

Shortly after her murder, a national protest calling for justice was held by the recently-founded Civil Society Network (*The Malta Independent*, 2017), and this was followed up by smaller albeit relatively large protests in the following weeks. Subsequently, newly set up organisations such as Occupy



Justice and Repubblika organized monthly vigils which demanded justice for Caruana Galizia.

During November 2019, there were significant developments in the investigations of Caruana Galizia's murder. Yorgen Fenech, a highly influential businessman from the Tumas Group (Briguglio, 1998), and who was involved in major government projects, was arrested, and eventually the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff Keith Schembri and Minister Konrad Mizzi, both of whom were highlighted in the Panama Papers scandal (Briguglio, 2017), resigned from their posts, the former after being questioned by the Police. Another Minister, Chris Cardona, suspended himself pending investigations (BBC, 2019a).

This escalation of events was accompanied by a repertoire of protests, most of which were organized by civil society groups Occupy Justice and Repubblika, which, together with blogger Manuel Delia, had been consistently organizing vigils and other activities related to Caruana Galizia in the previous months.

Protests regularly had hundreds and at times thousands of participants, with the largest protest peaking on 1 December 2019 (*The Malta Independent*, 2019), having a huge crowd similar to the post-Daphne murder protest on 22 October 2017. Of particular interest was that the protests eventually gained the support of a wide range of civil society organisations such as the left-wing Moviment Graffiti as well as of most of the independent media. In the meantime, Malta was hitting global news headlines (BBC, 2019b) and a chorus of voices, including opposition and non-parliamentary political parties, were calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat (*Times of Malta*, 2019). When he eventually announced his resignation, he gave himself some weeks' time to remain in place before handing over to his successor. In return, this too was criticized by those calling for his resignation, who demanded that his resignation should be with immediate effect.

Timeline of events

Date – 2019	Description
16 November	Instead of the usual monthly vigil held to demand justice for Daphne Caruana Galizia, a protest is held after Office of the Prime Minister chief of staff Keith Schembri withdrew a libel suit which he himself had started against former Nationalist Party (PN) leader Simon Busuttil. Protest is organised in Valletta by Repubblika and Occupy Justice. Partit Nazzjonalista and the smaller Partit Demokratiku and Alternattiva Demokratika-The Green Party participate.
19 November	Prime Minister Joseph Muscat offers a presidential pardon to Melvin Theuma, suspected middleman in Caruana Galizia’s assassination.
20 November	Yorgen Fenech, owner of 17 Black, is arrested. This leads to various civil society protests and to the eventual resignation of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, the resignation of his chief of staff Keith Schembri and of minister Konrad Mizzi, the suspension of minister Chris Cardona.
20 November	The first anti-corruption protest is organised, attended by hundreds, outside Parliament. It is organized by Occupy Justice, Repubblika and ManuelDelia.com. Manuel Delia, a prominent blogger, activist in Repubblika, former PN candidate, former member of Minister’s Secretariat, and current critic of current PN leader Adrian Delia, addresses those present. Protesters shout ‘mafia’ and obstruct two ministers in their car.
21 November	Opposition and PN leader Adrian Delia states that Joseph Muscat is complicit as he refused to take action against Keith Schembri and Konrad Mizzi. The PN announces that it will join the second anti-corruption

	protest organised by civil society groups on Friday, 22 November.
22 November	Adrian Delia asks President of Malta George Vella to take action over the ‘constitutional imbalance’ characterised by the Prime Minister’s absolute power of institutions.
22 November	The second anti-corruption protest is held in front of the Office of the Prime Minister in Valletta. Civil Society groups call for Joseph Muscat’s resignation. Protest is organised by Repubblika, Occupy Justice and ManuelDelia.com. Other participants include the PN and Moviment Graffiti, the latter revising its previous stance.
23 November	Yorgen Fenech requests a presidential pardon in exchange for information on the murder of Caruana Galizia. Veteran minister Evarist Bartolo calls for the resignations of Keith Schembri and Konrad Mizzi.
24 November	<i>The Malta Independent</i> reports that the Labour Party’s parliamentary group is not united over Prime Minister Joseph Muscat’s position, but is ‘in almost unanimous’ that Schembri and Mizzi should go. Prime Minister Muscat says that ‘this is a very delicate moment and my duty is to give the country the leadership it has trusted me with.’ Minister Evarist Bartolo states that Malta cannot protect murderers and money launderers.
25 November	Melvin Theuma is granted a presidential pardon. The fourth anti-corruption protest is organised, in front of Parliament. Social partners UHM-Voice of the Workers, Confederation of Malta Trade Unions and the Malta Employers’ Association express their concern with the current situation.
26 November	Keith Schembri resigns from OPM chief of staff. He is

	<p>questioned by police and his home is searched. Konrad Mizzi resigns from Minister, and Chris Cardona suspends himself from Minister. Adrian Delia tells Parliament that the government ‘has evidently been hijacked by a criminal organisation.’ Joseph Muscat is unanimously backed by the Labour Party executive and MPs. The fifth anti-corruption protest is organised by Repubblika and Occupy Justice, in front of Parliament. Eggs and coins are thrown at ministers’ cars. Speakers include Manuel Delia, Pia Zammit and two PN former candidates, David Thake and Norman Vella. Opposition MPs from PN and PD are present. Reporters Without Borders, PEN International, Transparency International and Aditus express their concern with the situation.</p>
27 November	<p>PN MPs walk out of Parliament after Joseph Muscat refuses to shoulder responsibility for Keith Schembri and Konrad Mizzi. The sixth anti-corruption protest is held outside Parliament, once again</p>
28 November	<p>News emerges that the European Parliament will be sending an urgent mission to Malta to check out the investigations concerning the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia. A protest is held in front on the Maltese High Commission in London. Joseph Muscat’s cabinet hold a long night meeting. The seventh anti-corruption protest is held, and those present include Matthew and Paul Caruana Galizia, sons of Daphne.</p>
29 November	<p>Following cabinet’s late night meeting, Joseph Muscat announces that cabinet unanimously disagreed that Yorgen Fenech should receive a pardon. Keith Schembri is released from arrest without charge. In the meantime, some clashes take place between security officials and protestors, with journalists briefly blocked from exiting the Office of the Prime Minister. Joseph Muscat visits</p>

	<p>President George Vella, and says he will be resigning from Prime Minister as soon as Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder suspect is brought to justice. Yorgen Fenech is taken to court. A sit-down protest is held by some students and academics on the streets near the University of Malta. The eighth anti-corruption protest is held in front of the Office of the Prime Minister. Speakers include UHM-Voice of the Workers Josef Vella, activist Amy Mallia, and Manuel Delia. In the meantime, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights warns Joseph Muscat to keep political interference out of investigations about the murder of Caruana Galizia. Pieter Omtzigt, the Council of Europe's rapporteur on the assassination of Caruana Galizia and rule of law in Malta, welcomes the rumoured pending resignation of Joseph Muscat.</p>
30 November	<p>Socialist protesters led by leftist organisation Moviment Graffiti congregate in front of the Office of the Prime Minister. Speakers include Graffiti's Andre Callus and Wayne Flask, anti-poverty campaigner Matthew Borg, academic and women's rights campaigner Andrea Dibben, and academic and writer Immanuel Mifsud. Three hundred and sixty socialists sign a letter expressing their outrage at the situation. Labour MEP Miriam Dalli states that she feels angry and betrayed, saying that many people including Labourites share her thoughts. The ninth anti-corruption protest is held in Valletta, insisting on the resignation of Joseph Muscat. Yorgen Fenech is formally charged with complicity in the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia.</p>
1 December	<p>The Labour parliamentary group holds four hour meeting to discuss Dr Muscat's expected departure as Prime Minister. It consequently expresses its unanimous</p>

	<p>support for the Prime Minister in all decisions he would be taking and reaffirms its confidence in him. On the same day, Joseph Muscat announces he will resign as leader of Labour and Prime Minister after Labour elects a new leader on 12 January. Opposition leader Adrian Delia announces his party's boycott of any activity featuring Joseph Muscat. Evarist Bartolo warns against Labour committing 'suicide'. Earlier, thousands of protesters participate in the tenth anti-corruption protest, organised by Repubblika, Occupy Justice and ManuelDelia.com, demanding his immediate resignation. Speakers include Mark Anthony Sammut, a PN local councillor who had recently resigned from President of the party executive and had led a campaign to oust party leader Adrian Delia.</p>
<p>2 December</p>	<p>President George Vella refuses Yorgen Fenech's request for a pardon, basing his decision on Cabinet's recommendation. Protesters gather in front of Parliament in the eleventh anti-corruption protest, preventing MPs from leaving the building and demanding Muscat's immediate resignation. Police earlier ask nearby shops to close at 3pm. In the meantime, Labour supporters gather outside their party headquarters to express support for Muscat, despite being ordered by the party not to congregate. A European Parliament delegation arrives in Malta for fact-finding mission.</p>
<p>3 December</p>	<p>The European Parliament delegation meets Joseph Muscat and expresses concerns about the integrity of the Caruana Galizia investigation. In the meantime, a small number of protesters calling for Muscat's immediate resignation shout 'murderers' as he was entering his office for the meeting. President George Vella appeals</p>

	for calm. <i>Times of Malta</i> reports that police find a letter at Yorgen Fenech's property, handwritten by Melvin Theuma, which implicates both Fenech and Keith Schembri in the assassination of Caruana Galizia. In the letter, Theuma says he has recordings and a picture of him together with Schembri inside the Office of the Prime Minister to ensure that truth emerges if he was eliminated. Theuma also testifies in court, stating that Yorgen Fenech was the 'only mastermind' and that Keith Schembri offered him a government job. On the same day, a crowd protests outside the Police Headquarters, demanding the arrest of Keith Schembri.
4 December	Melvin Theuma's court testimony continues, describing Yorgen Fenech as the only 'mastermind'. Three hundred academics (a minority) call for Joseph Muscat's resignation or removal. The Chamber of Architects, the Chamber of Psychologists and the IT Association express their respective concerns with the situation.
5 December	Yorgen Fenech testifies in court in a constitutional case calling for the removal of leading investigator Keith Arnaud. Fenech states that Keith Schembri used to give him key information obtained from Arnaud, that his phone was tapped and that Schembri tried to give him notes whilst Fenech was under investigation.
6 December	Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health Chris Fearne launches his campaign to become Labour leader and Prime Minister. He promises justice and institutional integrity and responsibility. The media projects him as favourite to win the contest against Labour MP and Prime Minister's legal adviser Robert Abela, who subsequently announces his candidature.
7 December	The second protest by Maltese expats in London is held, this time in Parliament Square.

8 December	Joseph Muscat embarks on a farewell tour to thank Labour supporters and to express his loyalty towards Labour. He is accompanied by his wife Michelle and the two leadership candidates Fearne and Abela. The twelfth anti-corruption protest is held in Valletta, this time being a national protest attended by thousands, with speakers including Andre Callus from Moviment Graffiti, LGBT activist Christian Pace, who stated he voted Labour in 2013, former PN candidate Norman Vella, Occupy Justice activist Louiselle Vassallo, and Manuel Delia.
9 December	Moviment Graffiti activists storm Castille, the Office of the Prime Minister, and organise a sit-in which lasts some hours.
10 December	The list of public, political, media and civil society voices calling for Joseph Muscat's immediate resignation keeps growing.
12-13 December	Joseph Muscat participates in the EU summit. On 12 December a protest is held in Brussels near the Maltese EU Embassy during the summit.
13 December	Republic Day. President George Vella makes a hard hitting speech on the current situation. In the meantime, Repubblika, OccupyJustice and ManuelDelia.com organise the thirteenth anti-corruption protest, also in Valletta.
15 December	Joseph Muscat continues his farewell tour in sister island Gozo.
16 December	Malta's Central Bank warns that political uncertainty risks impacting public finance. Activists congregate for the monthly vigil held for Daphne Caruana Galizia.
24 December	Occupy Justice affix coal and posters on Ministerial offices.
31 December	Malta's New Year's Eve celebrations attract 70,000

	people in Valletta.
31 December	Prime Minister Joseph Muscat addresses the nation through the media to mark the start of 2020.

Sources: *The Malta Independent*, *Malta Today*, *Times of Malta*

Conclusion: Aftermath of the 2019 protests

In his yearly report for 2019, Malta's Ombudsman said that organized civil society was one of the factors that brought down an administration (*The Malta Independent*, 2020). What is sure is that Joseph Muscat resigned from Prime Minister and Labour leader in mid-January 2020, once Robert Abela was elected leader of the Labour Party and made Prime Minister.

At the same time, however, Labour's administration did not seem to be dented by this political crisis. Surveys showed that its lead over the Nationalist Party, which has been in place for over a decade, remained considerable. Sociologist Godfrey Baldacchino (2020) hypothesized that Malta is heading towards a 'one-party democracy'. This is different from a 'one-party state', as it takes place within a democratic setting. As he puts it, this model is found in countries such as Japan, Singapore, and Sweden, where one mainstream, typically centrist, political party maintains a 'willing coalition of interests'.

At the same time, New Year's celebrations in Valletta, just a few days after the protest cycle, had a 70,000 strong crowd (*The Malta Independent*, 2020a), which eclipsed by far the number of protesters even in the largest demonstrations. Incidentally, even though protest featured prominently in Malta's mediascape—a survey commissioned by the *Times of Malta* (2020) showed that only 6 per cent of the population attended a protest in the 12 months preceding June 2020, and this included last year's season of protests related to the investigation of Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder. The same survey found that only four per cent of the population campaigned for a cause, a figure which is ten per cent lower than that representing people inclined to help a political party, and 12 per cent lower than those who helped a religious organisation. Moreover, follow-up protests in January 2020 to the ones held in 2019, including the first protest under Robert



Abela's new premiership, had diminishing attendances (*Malta Today*, 2020a, b).

A Eurobarometer survey (2020) held amid the turmoil, between 14 and 28 November 2019, showed that the most important issues facing Malta were perceived to be immigration, mentioned by 62% of respondents, followed by environment, climate and energy issues (37%), rising prices and inflation (19%), housing (18%), and crime (16%).

The survey showed that, even though trust in the police had declined to 59%—lower than 68% in 2018 and lower than the EU average of 71%—, this institution enjoys more trust 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, 51% trusted the Government, 44% trusted Parliament, and 53% trusted the European Union.

The Eurobarometer survey also showed general satisfaction with people's standard of living. Though there was a slight decrease in the percentage of Maltese who stated they were satisfied with their life, the 92% approval rate is the highest positive figure throughout the EU. Economy and employment perceptions were high, albeit lower than in the previous year.

With regards to political issues, almost 50% expressed satisfaction on the workings of democracy in Malta, 25% less than the previous year, with 48% saying they were satisfied with the situation and 46% saying they were not: EU averages read 54% satisfied (57% for EU 27) and 44% dissatisfied. But in 2018, 71% of Maltese had said they were satisfied with the state of democracy in the country, as opposed to 24% who were not. The highest level of dissatisfaction was among those aged between 18 and 24.

The Eurobarometer also revealed a significant drop in people's positive perception of their country: 58% perceived the country's situation to be 'good or quite good'. In 2018, 87% of respondents held a positive

perception of the general situation in Malta. Yet Malta's score was higher than the EU average.

Besides, scientific surveys held by newspapers Malta Today (2020d) and it-Torca in the first months of 2020, both confirmed the significant gap between the two major parties, and that third parties have failed to make any inroads: The Torca survey giving Labour 55%, the Nationalist Party 42%, and small parties 2.5% (*Malta Winds*, 2020).

On the other hand, Daphne Caruana Galizia's case retained prominence in Malta's news cycle, as did good governance and civil society activism. During 2020, the Labour Government acted upon constitutional reforms suggested by the Venice Commission, albeit being criticized in Malta for not going far enough and lacking consultation (ConstitutionNet 2020a, b; Borg, 2020).

In the meantime, a new challenge, in the form of an emerging global pandemic was knocking on Malta's (and the world's) door: COVID-19.

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