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Firefighting or uniting

Michael Briguglio

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As the investigation into Daphne Caruana Galizia's murder progresses, Malta's news portals are once again dominated by corruption and deficit in governance.

The omerta' that appeared to be in place until the end of 2019 is apparently imploding even further, as key implicated figures try to protect themselves and their allies.

The coming days will give us a clearer picture of what Robert Abela meant when he paradoxically spoke of both good governance and continuity when he was elected Labour leader and Prime Minister.

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In the meantime, commentators, activists, politicians and journalists are coming up with interpretations and narratives regarding the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, and its political ramifications. One hopes that the ongoing investigations and judicial procedures will end in justice being served.

Keith Schembri's court appearance earlier this week looked like an attempt at creating confusion, diversions, and new narratives. His testimony was not as spectacular as he promised a day before through social media, but his denials and allegations seem to follow the 'fire hosing' propaganda strategy which I wrote about in the Malta Independent last November 14. In my reading, Schembri acted as a propaganda machine spewing many narratives on the table, each intentionally spinning and occupying news headlines, thus elbowing out other items on the agenda. Different voices with different affiliations and interests give their own interpretations of said narratives. In turn, this brought about an information overkill, possibly resulting in the normalisation of the way of things whilst everyone is busy combatting each other. Fact and fiction compete in this post-truth context.

Such firefighting has so far played into Labour's hands, as despite the party having its own internal contradictions, it enjoys a considerable lead over the Nationalist Party in polls. But it is imperative to note that the same polls indicate a substantial number of respondents whose voting preference is undeclared or unclear. If the PN wins these voters over, it may indeed turn the tables.

But politics is not so simple. It comprises a complex logic of discourses, numbers, actions, and parameters. Malta is a small island state with two electable parliamentary forces, high voter turnouts, proximity between politicians and voters, people wearing multiple hats, and no indication open voters are willing to elect any third parties.

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than the one currently in government. It cannot simply appeal to a singular group or demand, whatever that may be.

In the meantime, the PN's current reform process promises a more open and dynamic approach as well as the will to have evidence-based strategies, and to be closer to people's aspirations.

By people I am not only referring to the voices which have considerable presence in the media sphere, but also to the silent majority who are less visible on the front pages but whose voting power can make or break governments.

At the same time, those who do not wish to keep Labour in power have three basic choices with their vote. Either not to vote, to vote for a third party, or to vote PN. The logic of numbers shows that the PN option is the only realistic choice for a change in government.

If Abela's government deems it appropriate to hold early elections as an attempt to save itself, non-Labour voters may soon be hard pressed to reflect on the viability of such voting options.

Thus, the relationship between the PN and the plurality of voters - who according to surveys are not supporting either party - points in different directions. The PN needs to convince them that they are a viable alternative to the current government. At the same time such persons and groups, with all their different aspirations, demands, and degree of public visibility, have their own agency. They can choose to form part of the umbrella that creates a new government, both directly or indirectly. One can be the change one wishes to see, within the parameters of Malta's democratic peculiarities.

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