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## Corruption, community, social capital

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The recent Transparency International survey on attitudes to corruption has produced findings which deserve engagement.

The survey, which was held across the EU, shows that public perceptions about corruption in Malta open comparatively in the middle-stream of EU nations. According to respondents in Malta, arc

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thought that ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption.

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One prominent social-scientific explanation of corruption holds that market-liberal policies which privatise and deregulate public assets and services create incentives to those bidding for contracts, sometimes resulting in corruption along the way. Another explanation holds that even in less liberal economic set-ups, governments satisfy 'rent-seekers' by providing them with employment opportunities, privileges, and favours in return for political loyalty. Indeed, some of the most corrupt states comprise centralised economies supposedly for the 'people'.

If we are analysing governance, particularly in small states like Malta, I would be wary of reducing all 'personal connections' in politics to corruption. Let me give an example.

Let us imagine that locality 'A' comprises hardworking local councillors who practice 'on the ground politics' that gives due importance to residents aspirations, needs, and grievances. Let us imagine that a constant flow of communication exists between residents and councillors of the same locality, resulting in efficient work such as the fixing of broken pavements and cleanliness. Whilst this would involve personal connections, as the politicians in question would be close to the people, I would not call this corruption.

Of course, one may ask, and rightly so, whether there should be proper impersonal administrative procedures for such work to be carried out, and I would agree. But this presupposition ignores the inefficiency and lack of passion which sometimes characterises bureaucracy. In a small state where politicians are highly accessible, it is sometimes more effective to contact your local councillor than open [redacted] tangled in a bureaucratic labyrinth.

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expense of alternative contractors who may provide a better service. In this case, personal connections would have been used for corrupt practice, at the expense of meritocracy and transparency.

Hence, when analysing and investigating corruption in small states, the starting point should not be whether constituents have connections with politicians or not. It is a fact of life that in small societies, many people tend to be in close proximity both physically and socially. Besides, in small societies, the wearing of multiple hats is commonplace – social interaction takes place in different roles, in spheres such as politics, employment, community, family, sports, festas, public services and so forth. If plural identities are a main characteristic of society today, they are amplified in small states.

A useful analysis of governance in small states would be to distinguish between practices which are corrupt and those which relate to on-the-ground politics. Such analyses should focus not only on elected politicians, but also on activists, community leaders, and so forth. It is one thing to speak up for 'voiceless' people who are suffering in silence, and it is another thing to favour one business-arrangement over another through corrupt practice.

By all means, let us invest in more on-the-ground politics and social capital: Where trust, reciprocity, common ground, and the common good are guiding values and practices. This can help foster more social integration and communitarian spirit. In this pursuit, let us ensure that even the least networked people or groups have access to facilities to express their aspirations and concerns to decision-makers. For let us keep in mind, that apart from the 'visible' residents of any locality, there are others who are lost in the crowd, within the paradox of urban isolation.

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