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## A new political season?

Michael Briguglio

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As things stand, Malta's two-party system seems here to stay. True, voting turnout in the 2019 European elections was a record low, but third parties did not benefit from this in terms of electability. The local council elections confirmed this too, which is very noteworthy considering that on paper small parties stand a better chance at being elected in such elections rather than when the choice of government is at stake during general elections.

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The only foreseeable exception is when small party candidates join a big party list: Partit Demokratiku tried this successfully through the Forza Nazzjonali PN-PD coalition in 2017 – its eventual outcome is another matter.

Of course, the future is unwritten and small parties may indeed one day see a change in their electoral fortunes. But the impacts, incumbency and networks of the main political parties and the aspirations and choices of voters, as supported by sociological evidence, cannot be ignored in serious political analysis.

By this, I am not saying that third parties are not important, far from it: To begin with, they broaden the parameters of political discourse. Besides, their vote can have an impact on election results, even if they themselves are not elected. For example, if the gap between the two main parties is small, the third-party vote gains currency.

Small parties also have other impacts, some of which are like the possible impacts of civil society organisations. These include the introduction of new policies, procedures and structures and in raising public awareness on various issues, particularly when major parties are silent or join the debate later in the day. Alternattiva Demokratika – The Green Party has been effective in this regard.

Shrewd political civil society activists are aware of the electoral prospects of small parties, and this may be one reason why their respective organisations would rather not transform into political parties.

But such NGOs have their own impacts: the way they sensitize public opinion (even on new grievances, demands and issues), their media coverage, their political networks, their participation in procedures and structures and their occasional successes in their substantive demands. Not to mention that, as Moviment Graffiti puts it, they offer 'spaces' to people who do not wish to associate with one party or another.

open ; can be seen to have a symbiotic relationship with political parties – they need each other

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recent history, the LGBTIQ reforms, various environmental victories and good governance demands are cases in point. Of course, this raises questions about how close or far civil society organisations should be to political parties: If they are too close, they can lose their autonomy and critical edge. If they are too distant, their impacts may be reduced.

Such intricacies are quite normal in democratic politics. It is political parties in parliament which legislate on policies, but they respond to various pressures, including those of social movements. Again, it would be preposterous to assume that only social movements have an impact on policy making. The logic of numbers includes many voices and interests who are less publicly visible. Not to mention other forms of impact, including those which are difficult to predict in advance – for example I believe that the breakdown of omerta' in the Daphne Caruana Galizia investigations made Joseph Muscat's position untenable even among various Labour Party elites.

Which brings me to my main argument. I augur that in the post-Muscat context Malta heads towards a new political season characterised by the parameters of liberal democracy, where policy making for a better society becomes the main scope of politics, and not the enrichment of some ruling elite through devious strategies beyond legitimate political parameters.

Within the Maltese context, the two major political parties are umbrellas, and their main challenge is how to comprise broad coalitions, both in terms of their internal factions but also externally with political and civil society voices and with the plurality of voters and groups which are not so visible in the media sphere.

In such a political scenario, one should judge political performance through evidence and not through in-advance-ready-made statements (whether euphoric or apocalyptic) which are so symptomatic of suffocating tribalism and sectarianism.

In this regard, two current episodes are noteworthy.

First, Prime Minister Robert Abela has carried out changes within cabinet wherein certain elites associated with bad governance and corruption seem to be out of the picture. The Prime Minister's chief of staff, Clyde Caruana comes from the scholarly/policy sphere – a welcome shift from Joseph Muscat's choice of Keith Schembri. Perhaps we finally have a 'normal' government after six years tainted by a dark cloud of corruption and impunity within Joseph Muscat's premiership, wherein political scandal and abuse of power suffocated political debate. Of course, this does not mean the end of political pluralism and differences. The parliamentary opposition, small parties and civil society have a vital role to play in keeping government in check and in proposing alternatives. The Nationalist Party in particular, aspires to be in government.

Second, Simon Busuttill's new role as Secretary General of the European People's Party showed that he is exiting parliament with dignity into a merited new role in European politics. This contrasts sharply with Joseph Muscat. The latter's style extended the definition of political coalitions in unacceptable ways, normalising corruption, impunity and deficit in governance. Muscat wanted to conquer Europe, but ended up losing his job as disgraced Prime Minister.

In this new political context, let us rise above hatred, entitlement, and tribalism to give way to open operation, ideas, and policies. We can agree to disagree, we can have our preferences and