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## Labour's power bloc

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Thursday, 9 January 2020, 08:20

Last update: about 3 years ago



When one aspires for political change, one must understand the political context in question.

In this article I aim to highlight some components which - to date - have made up Labour's power bloc (or hegemonic formation).

One important component is that which is dominating the news cycle: the implosion of Joseph Muscat following years of corrupt rule, and the corresponding dismantling of regulatory institutions, which were meant to ensure good governance. The controversial sales of public assets, lack of transparency, impunity and inaction in the face of bad practice were the name of the game under Joseph Muscat. He seemed to get away with it by politically seducing others into improving their own situations whilst the ruling elite shared the spoils.

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This strategy seemed invulnerable, but the ramifications of the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia made it untenable. The turn of events during the end of 2019 - including the requests for presidential pardons - suggested that omerta' was breaking down. Cans of worms were opened in the judicial process and the media, and protagonists appeared to be doing their utmost to save themselves. Amid the distrust, the panic, and the pressure, Muscat could no longer lead Labour, but he was granted stay for weeks, in what looked like a compromise among Labour elites.

So let us go back a number of years to see how the Joseph Muscat strategy developed.

In the 1990s, Alfred Sant opened Labour to social groups beyond its traditional bases, something which Eddie Fenech Adami did with the Nationalist Party in the 1980s.

In the 1990s, Sant spoke up on Labour's need to embrace the free market and the middle class. His stint as Prime Minister lasted only 22 months, but this approach was taken up by Joseph Muscat who extended Labour's boundaries even further through alliance-building for electoral purposes. A clear example of this was Labour's support of the LGBTIQ movement, which was very visible in the media sphere.

But I believe that Labour did much on-the-ground work to attract less visible voters who previously voted for the Nationalist Party. Here I am not only referring to those who had instrumental needs - such as business owners who shifted alliance - or to voters seeking some form of patronage, nor am I simply referring to the alleged 'fourth storey' networks of corruption, but also to the many voters who were disappointed with the Nationalist Party's style of governance and who were attracted to Joseph Muscat's style and electoral promises.

It is also quite clear that Labour's coalition-building strategy involved big land developers, who in turn benefitted from the sale of public land and the liberalisation of planning policy. Indeed, development policy in Malta is very much based on a 'symbiotic relationship' between the state and land developers, both benefitting from the exploitation of land: developers provide economic growth, so the state supports this economic model.

Muscat's Labour accelerated this mode of development, facilitating both big and small development projects which together had cumulative impacts on Malta's urban and rural landscapes. As a result, the relationship between the state and land developers now also incorporates smaller developers, i.e. people who experienced upward mobility through Labour's planning and economic policies. As stated in my article in the Malta Independent (28 November, 2019), the construction cake is not only made up of big business, but also comprises small contractors, working class and middle-class families who build extra storeys to sell or rent out, and owners of agricultural land who develop it for speculative purposes.

Thus, it looks like Labour has so far managed to attract a significant number of voters who benefit open policies that facilitate the capitalisation of property. Even though there are others who a

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networks is characteristic of small states like Malta, where politics are personalised; but Labour exploited this power to unprecedented levels, such as through the creation of hundreds of positions of trust and an extensive micro-managed industry of favours, clearly contradicting Muscat's promises of meritocracy.

Labour's embracing of civil liberties such as divorce and LGBTIQ rights was also an important element in its electoral successes. Whilst the Nationalist Party had previously presented itself as the guarantor of civil liberties such as free speech, economic rights, and the normalisation of democracy (even through EU membership), it then committed a massive strategic error in the divorce referendum, opening up a window of political opportunity for Labour.

In the social sphere, Labour's electoral support can be explained through policies such as those on childcare, assistance to property buyers, and its PR offensive regarding the price of utility bills. Whether bills have decreased as promised is another matter. Not to mention the current situation regarding Labour's energy policy, both in terms of stability, security of supply, governance controversies and corruption questions.

Indeed, Labour's communication strategy was another key element in its electoral success. For example, whilst a Nationalist government weathered the economic crisis a decade ago, Labour's public relations won the communications battle in articulating Malta's case as precarious. It is however more likely that Labour inherited relatively solid economic foundations: A far cry from the situation in neighbouring countries in Southern Europe.

Labour also found novel ways to generate government revenue other than through tax increases, resulting in a budgetary surplus. Most notably, this includes the sale of passports, which can be questioned on various grounds, from economic to moral. Come election time, I believe that Labour will make electoral use of such revenue to win votes.

The Maltese economy experienced rapid growth during Muscat's tenure. But this had social and environmental costs ranging from overdevelopment to unaffordable rent, not to mention the disabling of regulatory institutions.

The question one needs to ask here is how to construct a robust economic model which is based on economic, social, and environmental sustainability rather than short-term policies, pillaging of the environment, and deficit in governance. This policy-process should include both expert advice and on-the-ground work within various elements of Maltese society.

As I argued in The Malta Independent on 12 December 2019, Malta also needs 'crook-proof' constitutional reform. There should be clear rules for political players, and institutions should be equipped to curtail excesses by Governments.

The brutal murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, its ramifications, and the flow of corruption around Castille are ugly reminders of the need for such reform. But they also show us that there should be clear boundaries in political coalition building. Joseph Muscat's gamble and tricks backfired, and this should serve as a warning to future Prime Ministers who have no limits in their quest for power. He will exit the scene as a disgraced Prime Minister, who, according to social scientific surveys, became more popular than the Labour Party.

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perceptions are not only those which have the loudest voices in the media sphere. There is a silent majority (which in itself may comprise plural perceptions and affiliations) which does not make the headlines.

Thus, if one wants political change, one should understand the current context and present a better alternative which is electorally significant. A strategy of coalition-building is imperative in this regard. Unity and diversity can work hand in hand, but rules, ethics and boundaries should be in place to avoid having another Joseph Muscat.

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