



Tal-Barrani



The beginning of the end



The savagery and viciousness which increasingly started to become the hallmark of successive Labour administrations comes out in no uncertain way

when the incidents of what happened at Zejtun on the 30th November, 1986 are examined. Having been foiled by the courts in their attempt to stop the

Nationalist Party from holding a mass meeting in Zejtun, the Labour machine went all out to ensure that the Nationalists would not meet on its terra santa.

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When the Nationalist Party decided to hold a mass meeting in Zejtun it was sending out a clear message. Until then Labour supporters had declared certain areas to be 'theirs' and heckled and harassed any minor political activities that the Nationalist Party organised in places like Bormla. Nationalist clubs in the area were regularly gutted by Labour supporters. So, when on the 26 November the Nationalist Party applied for permission to hold a rally in Zejtun, it was underlining its sovereign right to hold a meeting in any area of the country that it wanted to. From their part the Labourites took it as an act of defiance and the stage was set for mayhem.

A problem of where to hold the meeting cropped up when it turned out that both parties had included Zebbug on their lists of possible venues for mass meetings. This was solved when the Nationalist Party said that it would not insist about Zebbug. Thus the Police issued the Nationalist Party with the authorisation to hold a meeting in Zejtun. This permit was revoked a few days later by a notification sent to the Nationalist Party by the deputy Commissioner of Police.

The Nationalist Party countered this order by initiating a constitutional case against the Commissioner of Police, Lawrence Pullicino. On the 28 November Judge Victor Caruana Colombo decreed the order to be illegal and to be null and void.

The very act of prohibiting such a meeting was illegal unless it could be proved that it was necessary.

The Nationalist Party, therefore could continue to plan and advertise for a mass meeting to be held in Zejtun of the 30 November. The court also said it was necessary to prove that there was a clear and imminent danger to the public to justify the prohibiting of a meeting. The arguments that the police had submitted did not constitute such proof. Judge Victor Borg Costanzi said that while the court appreciated the concern of the authorities, one could not ignore the fact that we are a people who are tol-

erant towards one other. Facts were to prove him wrong. He went on to say that we were civilised enough to ensure that others could meet and talk freely, even if what was being said was not pleasant to our ears. The judgement went on to say that if liberty was being threatened, it was up to the powers that be to ensure that this threat be removed. It could never be acceptable that liberty and freedom which were enshrined in the constitution, and which existed in the very essence of man, should be denied because of illegal threats.



Trouble

Deputy Commissioner Mifsud Tommasi, when called to the witness box, said that the Nationalist Party had not organised a meeting in Zejtun since 1971. When he noticed that there was going to be a gathering of Nationalist supporters in Zejtun, while at the same time a gathering of Labourites would be meeting in Zebbug, he had come to the conclusion that there could be trouble. He also anticipated that there would be a large body of people who would be antagonistic to the Nationalist Party meeting in Zejtun.

He said that he wanted to ensure that there would be a zone that separated the two gatherings. He also realised that notwithstanding a police presence, incidents were bound to happen. He said that there was a high probability that incidents of stone throwing or physical confrontation would occur. He was duty-bound to prevent situations where people could get hurt and therefore requested a meeting with the Prime Minister Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici. The Prime Minister approved Mifsud Tommasi's idea to stop the meeting.

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To further support his action Mifsud Tommasi cited three incidents in Zejtun which had happened recently. These included the confrontation between Nationalists and Labourites, the beating up of Alexander Cachia Zammit and the breaking down of the Nationalist Party club door during a meeting. Having said that, the Deputy Commissioner said that up to the time when he had put a stop to the forthcoming meeting, no incidents had been reported from Zejtun.



When asked whether he had any suspicions as to who could foment trouble, Mifsud Tommasi replied that he had no specific suspects.

When giving witness Prime Minister Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici said that he had authorised Mifsud Tommasi to stop the meeting because the latter had convinced him that in Zejtun public order was going to be broken and that it was not going to be possible for him to prevent that from happening. In spite of the political consequences the motivation behind the prohibition was a concern for public safety. He also decided to support the prohibition of the Zejtun meeting because of reports he had received that there was great tension in Zejtun.

The Court of Appeal upheld the decision of the first court. It said that it had no doubt that Maltese society was organised enough so as to ensure the safeguarding of fundamental rights by stopping those who would illegally undermine those very rights.

The court said that it was not possible that those who had penned the laws to safeguard the freedom of association of individuals would at the same time stifle those organisations that were there to protect those very rights.

The court said that it could understand the concern of the police and of the Prime Minister but that it was bound by the constitution and could make no exceptions when it came to the fundamental right of freedom of expression and of association. The reasons brought forward by the Assistant Commissioner did not con-

stitute sufficient justification to withdraw the permit for the meeting.

The mass meeting went on as planned. That morning the supporters started to gather early in front of the Nationalist Party Headquarters. The atmosphere was very tense as everybody knew what the situation was like in Zejtun. Shortly after mid-day Eddie Fenech Adami decided that it was time to drive to Zejtun. Before leaving, Nationalist officials held a press conference.

When people started to arrive at Tal-Barrani Road, they found a reception committee waiting for them; police, Labour thugs, an army unit and the infamous SMU were all there, ready to stop the Nationalists from entering Zejtun, which had come to assume an almost symbolic representation of things Labour; a sacred territory which had to be defended at all costs from the Nationalist infidel.



Roll call

People were shot and hit by bullets and had to be treated in hospital. Joseph Grima was hit in the back of his thigh as he was retreating from a phalanx of policemen who had emerged from the entrance of Zejtun to stop the Nationalists entering Mecca.

Another Victim, Carmelo Azzopardi sustained a gunshot wound to his left hand and had to be treated in hospital. A woman who bent low to try and avoid the tear gas which was being fired into the crowds got hit by a large rock which had been thrown in her general direction. A gas canister entered the car of John Zammit and he had to abandon it. As he left his car he turned round to see a bunch of thugs breaking it up and then setting fire to his vehicle. Gemma Calleja sought shelter in a scrap-yard and went to hide in it. A man followed her in and hit her so hard that she needed stitches. Other people were hit by bullets, rocks, beaten or had their vehicles thrashed or set alight.

Next week's Special report will continue to examine the mayhem at Zejtun and will also look at the court trials that followed this incident