



maltatoday

Editorial

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A participatory democracy

As our readers browse through our newspaper this morning we do not doubt the electoral state of nervous stress, tension and unease being felt by our readers as they anxiously await the electoral result.

This country has a tradition of lengthy hours of channel hopping awaiting the election results, followed by supporters taking to the streets on the first indications of their preferred party having won. Independently of who wins the coming elections we would caution a sense of moderation in the festivities that are likely to follow. We are not naïve enough not to know that our appeal will fall on deaf ears and once it is known which way the wind blows, cars will take to the streets, billboards will be damaged and mutual insults will be traded culminating in an atmosphere of jubilation and tension, depending on which side of the fence ones sympathies lie.

These tensions can be mitigated if certain guidelines are followed. The Public Broadcasting Service should give as much information available at any given moment in time that is possible.

Information allows people to build up an informed opinion of what is happening and reduces the necessity of people picking up their information from the rumour-mongering circuit. The public broadcaster should invite experts and opinion-makers to give a sense of the electoral process in all its complexities, because this time round the Constitutional provisions could be triggered before a final election result is known. In a scenario where neither of the two political parties gets an absolute majority of votes, and if there is a third party that can get a seat in parliament, then delays can take place till the final result is known. This delay will inevitably lead to increased tensions.

The political broadcasting stations should also be run with responsibility, particularly on Sunday, without the necessity of hurling insults at the opposing camp. As much information as possible should also be relayed from the political stations since most people will be following their favourite party's station for news and in-depth analysis of what is going on.

After this election we should look forward to a development in our democracy from a representative democracy to a participatory democracy, whereby the citizen becomes a growing protagonist and no longer a passive voter just once every five years. The voice of the citizen needs to be heard much more, with further mushrooming of Non-Governmental Organisations, residents' groups, niche issue associations, all of whom very often find that their voice is not sufficiently vocal in the traditional way politics is done in Malta. As we further develop in Europe more attention is likely to be given to issue politics, allowing interested parties more of a say in the democratic process. People expect their concerns to be given full attention and for immediate action to take place addressing particular problems. In mature democracies, politicians are expected to engage and find solutions to the problems people are facing. The extension of civil rights is seen as a direct consequence of participatory democracy.

To date our membership of the European Union has brought about substan-

tial economic benefits, with government focusing mainly on the need to reduce the deficit and enter the Eurozone successfully. With all this behind us, it is now time (apart from upgrading our environment) to also concentrate on extending civil rights in our country. The maturity from a representative to a participatory democracy is effectively all about extending civil rights. This involves putting on the political agenda issues of major concern to our electorate, like co-habitation rights and different life style choices. It is also all about changing the electoral system, which after today's election may become a far more pressing matter, if a growing number of voters find that their vote has not translated into representation in Parliament. The wasted votes may surpass that in previous elections and as a result create an inevitable wave in favour of a threshold being inserted in our electoral laws.

We hope that this election will prove to be the starting point for a discussion on the maturing of our democracy into a participatory one.

Quote of the week

"Now we know that Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando is a part-time politician, part-time farmer, a part-time dentist, a part-time journalist... and now a full-time cry-baby"

– Labour deputy leader Charles Mangion delivers an appraisal of the Nationalist MP on Wednesday, 5 March, in Zabbar.