



## POLITICS AND POWER IN MALTESE PROVERBS AND IDIOMS<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract:

Given its centuries-old origins and the inimitable mix of Semitic and Latinized vocabulary, the Maltese language benefits from a massive repertoire of proverbs and idioms that interpret life realities from the perspective of the common folks. The scope of this paper is to decipher a number of Maltese proverbs and idioms that encompass elements of political power and control. Each selected expression is probed in terms of political theory and contextualized from a sociological and anthropological standpoint. Such an analysis provides a cornucopia of diachronic and synchronic insights on how the Maltese perceive power and manipulation, judge the elites and the privileged, assess the art of politics and treat patronage and clientelism. “*The wit of one and the wisdom of many*” has organically led them to affirm their conviction that power manipulation, greed and elite collegiality, distortion of political virtues and exploitation of power games to the leverage of both the disadvantaged and the privileged are universal realities. In other words, these phenomena involving power and politics exist independently of the locals’ perceptions or interpretations.

**Keywords:** politics, power, elites, proverbs, idioms, Malta

### Abstract:

Bhala lingwa millenarja b’influwenzi mill-ilsna semitiċi u Latini, il-Malti għandu repertorju għani ta’ proverbji u idjomi li jinterpretaw ir-realtajiet tal-ħajja minn għajnejn il-popolin. L-iskop ta’ din ir-riċerka huwa li janalizza għadd minn dawn il-proverbji u idjomi li jinkorporaw aspetti marbutin mal-politika, il-poter u l-kontroll tal-massa mill-elit. Kull proverbju magħżul huwa diskuss fil-qafas tat-teorija politika u kuntestwalizzat mil-lat soċjoloġiku u antropoloġiku. Din l-analiżi ssawwar riflessjonijiet dijakroniċi u sinkroniċi ta’ kif il-Maltin jaħsbuha dwar il-poter u l-manipulazzjoni tal-massa, kif jiġġudikaw l-elit u l-klassi pprivileġġjata, kif jassessjaw l-arti politika u kif jitrattaw il-patrunaġġ u l-klijentaliżmu.

**Keywords:** politika, poter, elit, proverbji, idjomi, Malta

<sup>i</sup> IL-POLITIKA U L-POTER FIL-PROVERBJI U L-IDJOMI MALTIN

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## 1. Introduction

One of the attributes that adds vibrancy to any language is the multiplicity, versatility and resourcefulness of proverbs and idioms that fuel metaphorical figures of speech and a wealth of folk wisdom on shared fundamental understandings. Proverbs and idioms are two separate terms that are often used interchangeably as they are both considered a cultural component of a language, yet they do feature differences. Whereas an idiom is a phrase that has a figurative meaning and takes its significance from the context of the discourse, the proverb is piece of advice interwoven around general truth grounded in common senses and/or the sensible experience of humanity (Aquilina 1972, ii)

Given its centuries-old origins and the inimitable mix of Semitic and Latinized vocabulary, the Maltese language benefits from a massive repertoire of proverbial and idiomatic maxims that interpret life realities from the perspective of the common folks. These axioms defy time and space because many of them are still used today, even though they have been coined centuries ago. Some exist in other languages as well because people borrow them from cultures that exhibit similar characteristics to domestic traditions. The scope of this paper is to decipher a number of Maltese proverbs and idioms that encompass elements of political power and control by the elites. Each selected expression is first translated into English and then probed in terms of political theory and contextualized from a sociological and anthropological standpoint. Such an analysis provides a cornucopia of diachronic and synchronic insights on how the Maltese perceive power and manipulation, judge the elites and the privileged, assess the art of politics and treat patronage and clientelism.

This paper is segmented in four parts. Definitions, compositions, uses, applications and pitfalls of proverbs/idioms are, first, put into perspective. Then, these understandings are contextualised within the history and development of the Maltese language. Ten selected proverbial axioms are rolled out next wherein each folkloristic saying is outlined, analysed and interpreted through the application of political thought, as well as sociological and anthropological insights. The exposition concludes with a synthesis that leads to an inductive conceptual mapping of all the themes and inferences emerging from the analysis.

### **“The wit of one and the wisdom of many”**

The task of defining proverbs has proved surprisingly difficult. To start with, their origins are age-less as they cannot be attributed to any person, as in the case of famous and inspirational quotes. Their sources are abundant and diverse, embracing sacred scriptures like the Torah, the Bible and the Koran, as well as Confucian and Platonic philosophies, and Shakespearian verses. Contemporary ones are triggered by cinematography, music and advertisements, including news bulletins. Furthermore, when studying proverbial sayings, one encounters with countless variant versions, as well as with a high degree of borrowing and spread among different nations with the consequence that it becomes almost impossible to “*assign paternity*” (Fielding, 1824, ii). Due to their diversity of forms, origins and characteristics, Taylor (1931, 3) sustains that a scientific “*definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking*”. Inspired by poetic intuition to challenge the academic dilemma, John Russell (1792-1878) described the proverb as

*“the wit of one, and the wisdom of many”* (Mieder, 1993); a definition which over the years became a proverbial expression in its own right. When defining Persian proverbs, Zolfaghari and Ameri (2012, 107) encapsulated many of the innate characteristics of a proverb; including its fluency and casualness among the local populace, its stimulus to the collective psyche, as well as its reliance on figures of speech and cadence to ease retention. *“There’s a proverb for everything”*, maintains Peters (2016) as *“their timelessness is comforting”*. There are proverbs incorporating man’s relationship with nature, others are more interested in the nature of relationships between spouses, as well as among friends and business partners. There are those that speak about power, either from the perspective of those who lead or from the outlook of the rest who are being led. Some speak about the virtues and the joys of life, others confront vice, wickedness and the life of sin. Several of them inject the prospect of a new beginning where doom, failure and suffering strike, while others convey a message of hopelessness because experience shows that things are not going to turn for the better.

Nevertheless, Pennycook et al. (2015) position is diametrically opposite to those who speak positively on common folk wisdom. In their study, they found a correlation between pseudo-profound malarkey and low intelligence and, consequently, their results support the idea that *“accepting platitudes as true may be an important component of pseudo-profound bullshit receptivity”* (Pennycook et al. 2015, 549). Likewise, Shapiro warns against the downsides of proverbs because *“they can create simplicity of thought, [thus] ruling out complex solutions and ideas”* (Peters, 2016). Moreover, reliance on timeless sayings can contribute to a kind of groupthink and unreflectedness; thus, stifling creativity and the virtuosity of thinking outside the box.

In the next part, the discussion on proverbs and idioms will be contextualised within the Maltese language, which is spoken by circa 400,000, not including the Maltese diaspora (Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ilsien Malti, 2021).

### **“One of the most active folkloristic spheres”**

Maltese is the national language of Malta and official language of the state alongside English, while also serving as one of the official languages of the European Union; the only Semitic language so distinguished. Maltese is descended from Siculo-Arabic, the defunct Arabic dialect that stemmed in Sicily and was eventually introduced to Malta between the end of the ninth century and the end of the twelfth century (Brincat, 2005). As a result of the Norman invasion of Malta in 1091 and the subsequent re-Christianisation of the island, Maltese evolved independently of its Arabic origins in a gradual process of Latinisation (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander 1997). Over the centuries, it absorbed voluminous lexical material from Sicilian and Italian, and since the 1800s from English as well.

In his *Damma* (c.1766), the seminal Maltese-Italian dictionary, Ġanfrangisk Agius De Soldanis (1712-1770) felt the need to embellish vocabulary entries with figures of speech and idiomatic phrases that were frequently voiced in Malta and Gozo during the eighteenth century. The use of proverbs is further contextualised in his *Dialogues* which, according to Marshall (1971), are of vital importance for the linguistic, social and historical commentary of the Maltese under the Knights of Saint John.

The first collection of Maltese proverbs was published by Mikiel Anton Vassalli in 1828. In *Motti, Aforismi e Proverbii Maltesi*, Vassalli (1764-1829) documented 863 proverbs and expressions. He describes this collection “as a sort of a national code , a set of laws for the good of society which if ignored bear terrible consequences” (Ciappara 2014, 152). Since Vassalli’s times, a number of Maltese linguists and folklorists have scientifically compiled collections of Maltese proverbs. In the introduction of his compilation, Aquilina (1972, xi) expresses reverence to common folks’ knowledge that surpasses any expiry dates, because “most of them still survive in the towns and villages of Malta and Gozo and are still being transmitted orally from one generation to another”. Mifsud (1989, iii) shares Aquilina’s admiration to the collective patrimony of age-old proverbial repertoire and calls “the proverb as the most active folkloristic sphere in the lives of the Maltese”.

### Research focus and political context

Having annotated the significance, popularity and power of proverbs as a means “to connect to very deep psychological roots in human beings” (Peters 2016), this study will now encompass ten Maltese proverbs and idioms that have been purposively selected for their inferences involving politics, control, elites and ideological stances. Each proverb/idiom is analysed from various political and sociological viewpoints and interpreted within the context of domestic anthropological insights. The ten selected proverbs are the following:

- i. *Il-politika mahmuġa* (Politics is dirty).
- ii. *Kollox politika* (Everything is politics).
- iii. *Hobb lil Alla u lir-Regina u tgħix mingħajr tbatija* (Love God and the Queen and you live trouble-free).
- iv. *Pinnur* (weathercock).
- v. *Pajjiż tal-Mickey Mouse* (Mickey Mouse nation).
- vi. *Biex timxi 'l quddiem trid qaddis fis-sema u ieħor fl-art* (To succeed, you need a saint in heaven and another on earth).
- vii. *Min jikkmanda jagħmel il-liġi*. (those who are in command make the law)
- viii. *Mingħand Kajfa għalghand Pilatu* (from Caiaphas to Pilate).
- ix. *Kappell ma jmejjilx lill-ieħor* (A hat does not bow to another hat).
- x. *Il-ħuta minn rasha tinten* (The fish head is the first to rot).

Sayings 1 and 2 speak about the delusions of the Maltese concerning politics, whereas saying 3 refers to the Mediterranean mentality rooted in the false expectation of government playing God. An intransigent innate culture of political tribalism is hinted in saying 4, while mockery and cynicism are vented in saying 5. The remaining sayings encapsulate an array of different perspectives of how the commoners perceive the elites. Political patronage and clientelism form the core of saying 5, whereas sayings 6 and 9 express a fatalistic outlook by the commoners who are never given any chance to voice their opinions in the corridors of power. On their part, sayings 7 and 8 convey an antagonist attitude against excessive bureaucracy and elitist

collegiality, while saying 10 denounces the privileged who are the first to corrupt truth and virtues.

These ten proverbial sayings will be discussed within the parameters of the Maltese political terrain characterized by smallness, islandness and remoteness. Malta is a Southern European island nation-state comprising an archipelago of three islands in the Mediterranean Sea. It became independent in 1964, having been under British rule since 1800 after millennia of foreign rule. The Independence Constitution established Malta as a liberal parliamentary democracy, guaranteeing separation and interdependence among executive, judicial and legislative powers with regular elections based on universal suffrage. The country is divided into thirteen electoral districts, each electing five members to a unicameral House of Representatives on the basis of a Single Transferable Vote system of proportional representation, a system which was originally granted by the British in 1921. As an isolated island of simple Catholic faith – old-fashioned in its rituals, fervent in its expression - the Church had been almost a “*surrogate form of political expression and nationalism*” (Vassallo, 1979).

Deemed to be “*the purest two-party system in the developed world*” (Cini, 2002), Malta is necessarily bound to go on being “*politically divided, floating between two mutually exclusive concepts*” (Friggieri 2008, 57), that is *Partit Laburista* on side and *Partit Nazzjonalista* on the other end. The climate of domestic politics is highly polarized, divisive and dogmatic where party politics supports “*tribal cages that segregate people from each other*” (Mintoff, 2010). With one of the highest voter turnout rates in the world, invariably over 90 per cent, Malta’s population is habitually highly politically aware, participating enthusiastically in debates, elections and political manifestations. Notwithstanding this entrenched feature of a “*politically polarised society where politics penetrate almost every sphere of social, communal and interpersonal life*” (Zammit and Baldacchino 1989, 80), over the years, the Maltese have adopted a love-hate attitude towards their politicians and glimpses of “*extreme scepticism*” towards their political elites have been on the rise (Mitchell, 2002).

In the next part, each of the selected proverbs/idioms is explained and examined.

#### **i. Il-politika mahmuġa** (Politics is dirty)

A frequently used idiom that emphasizes the obscure outlook towards politics. It is not considered as an idiosyncratic axiom because the Maltese aphorism mirrors the prevalent perception which is widely shared around the globe. Moreover, given the dictum that politics is a dirty game, the locals advise their fellows to keep their distance from political participation so as not to tarnish their reputation. Hence, the saying “**tiċċappasx bil-politika**” (don’t get stained with politics).

Assessing the truthfulness of such an aphorism requires some insights derived from an etymological standpoint. The word “politics” originates from Ancient Greece, meaning “*affairs of the cities*”. In his epic work *Politika*, Aristotle (384-322 BC) wrote at length on the role that politics and the political community must play in bringing about the virtuous life in the citizenry (IEP, 2021). In medieval times, the term “politics” started being used in English after it was adopted from the French “*politique*” (Etymological Dictionary online). Politics is both a science and an art to improve people’s lives, stimulate social and economic development and guarantee peace and security to all citizens. Thus, in its Aristotelian exposition, politics was originally linked to virtues, better quality of life and ethical leadership. However, over the centuries, its

inferences grew darker until it reached a stage when politics became equivalent to filth, corruption and viciousness. Such a stark metamorphosis may have been triggered by the introduction of the word “power” from Old French *pouvoir* (meaning “the ability to do”) in the 14th century. During this period, the word power started being used to signify strength, vigor and might particularly in battle, as well as to indicate efficacy, control, mastery, lordship, dominion, ability or right to command or control in political and military affairs. These vocabulary enrichments were epitomised in Nicolás Macchiavelli’s *The Prince* (1532); a 16th century political treatise that uncovered the bare truth of realpolitik in early modern Europe. Machiavelli proposed that immoral behavior, such as the use of deceit and the murder of innocents, is legitimate and effective in politics; thus, safeguarding glory and survival for the seat of power. This alternative *forma mentis* to the ideal politik of the ancient Greek philosophers altered the way how the people perceive politics. Such a negative perspective is reinforced by contemporary experience wherein multitudes of politicians in democratic societies are focused on their own interests and legitimize manipulation, deceit and corrupt practices to retain their orbit of power.

The Maltese, like their counterparts in the Mediterranean, Europe and beyond, do not mince their words to condemn the dirty tricks of political games; however, their denunciation should be directed towards the insatiability and manipulation of *power* rather than to the art and science of *politics*.

## ii. **Kollox politika (Everything is politics)**

A prevailing expression depicting the Maltese frame of mind on how they deem politics to infiltrate all walks of life on the island. The idea, implied by this idiom, is that everything and everyone is political or exhibit some sort of political ambiguities or innuendoes. It is used as a depreciative assessment to affirm that politics is omnipresent in all the dynamics of private and public life: from business deals to employment opportunities; from the granting of development permits to the authorization of social benefits; from the “word from above” to jump the waiting list for a medical intervention to the manner by which you will be treated by the authorities. When the Maltese voice this culturally accepted set phrase, they are encapsulating a range of delusional sentiments characterizing the world of politics, including sarcasm, cynicism, distrust, bitterness, irony, contempt and fatalism. For the Maltese, politics is diametrically opposed to what is morally right, objective, just, fair and pristine.

Although this idiom is ingrained in the collective conscious of the Maltese, it is not an endemic expression because it is present in other languages and cultures. Thomas Mann (1875-1955), a German Nobel Prize laureate, penned “*Everything is politics*” in chapter 6 of his 1924 novel, *The Magic Mountain*. More recently, another Nobel prize winner, Paul Krugman states that “*In 21st century America everything is political*” (Reese 2020). Krugman condemns the proximity of big business and politicians that fuels “*monteray support from right-wing billionaires*”. Postulating a twist to the core of the proverbial maxim, Kenneth Craycraft, an attorney and theologian, maintains that “*Everything is political, but politics isn’t everything*” (Cincinnati.com, 2021).

**iii. Hobb lil Alla u lir-Regina u tghix minghajr tbatija** (Love God and the Queen and you live trouble-free)

An archaic proverb that was commonly used since the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). The saying is no longer voiced in the present-day except to suggest the bygone era, as in folklore and language studies, and historical novels. For 164 years, the British exploited the geographical location of Malta at the centre of the Mediterranean and rendered the island as an impenetrable fortress colony to secure their naval and military presence, as well as to safeguard their trade routes linking England to India and the Far East through the Suez Canal. The overpopulated archipelago of Malta was almost exclusively dependent on British military expenditure which varied with the demands of war (Pirota, 2021). Consequently, life on the islands was characterized by intermittent periods of famine and poverty on the one hand, and forceful economic shocks around the harbour region triggered by imperial war efforts on the other hand. Denied of any substantial political rights until the 1921 Constitution which granted home rule for the locals, the commoners had to find a *modus vivendi* in order to coexist peacefully under the Monarchical administration. This led to a culture of complacency among the local population wherein the Maltese developed an inclination to please the Crown; thus, ascertaining political patronage and nurturing a clientelistic society wherein jobs and favors were distributed on partisan bases. As fervent Catholics who trusted in God's faith since time immemorial, the Maltese learned to love Queen Victoria (1819-1901) too since she was ultimately responsible for their subsistence, welfare and security. Hence, as the proverb implies, those who loved God secured eternal life, while those who sided with the Queen earned benefactions that eased mundane sweats and tribulations. If one loves both, then he would have ensured a manageable living and a blessed afterlife. The admiration of the Maltese to Queen Victoria is eloquently manifested in the marble statue commissioned by public subscription in front of the National Library in Republic Square, Valletta, wherein the Sicilian sculpture Giuseppe Valenti depicted the Queen wearing a shawl of Maltese lace, in reference to the fact that she had ordered "*eight dozen pairs long and eight dozen pairs short pairs short mitts, besides scarf*" of Malta lace (Cini, 2011).

In contrast with the veneration and complacency of the commoners, a significant faction of the Maltese administrative and political elites resisted the Anglicization of the islands. They were adamant to acquire more influence and power from the Crown hegemony, as well as to protect the *Italianità* of Malta, particularly in terms of language and culture. These conflicting currents under colonial rule contained the seeds of domestic party politics that flourished during the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century (Frendo, 2013; Pirota, 2006).

**iv. Pinnur** (Weathercock)

A figure of speech attributed to a fickle person who does not think twice to change his/her opinion, including switching loyalty from one political party to another. It is a disparaging term because a person exhibiting this peculiar characteristic is not considered as a man of principle. Sometimes, the Maltese also use *idur ma' kull riħ* meaning to change direction in accordance with wherever the wind blows, or just *dar* indicating that the person changed his mind and voted for the "other" party, whereby politicians from the opposite side are considered "enemies".

This expression implies that, traditionally, party loyalty in Malta was inherited from one generation to another and, whenever someone decides to break line, he is not only considered unreliable but may also be found guilty of family betrayal. Lane (1998, 1) affirms that “[b]y all accounts, the identification of Maltese voters with a particular political party has been remarkably strong and stable for many years”. Intergenerational party exclusivity among families has led to tribal politics which, according to Warrington (2017), is “the defining characteristic of Maltese politics”. Since the formation of the first organized parties in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Maltese political landscape took the form of two tribal cages that segregated people from each other; consequently, when one dares to go beyond the hereditary family limits, he is immediately considered as nemesis who turned – *dar* – against the political clan.

Notwithstanding the age old tradition of party steadfastness, electoral results since the 1990s are indicating that the number of *pinnuri* or switchers is on the rise. The taboo of going against family voting patterns is losing its intransigence, although it may still be prevalent in certain quarters where diehard supporters thrive.

#### v. **Pajjiż tal-Mickey Mouse** (Mickey Mouse nation)

A satirical expression widely used to express the general sentiment of the Maltese on the way domestic politics are manouvered. Its origin dates back to 1995 when John Bundy, a radio and television host, won the song festival *L-Ghanja tal-Poplu* (People’s Ode Song Contest) with a song bearing the same title. *Pajjiż tal-Mickey Mouse* became an instant hit and, although almost three decades have passed since it was first performed, it remains popular even with the Maltese diaspora in America and Australia. The title of the song morphed into an idiosyncratic figure of speech used to criticize the manipulation of the commoners by the elites who enjoy political and economic power. The song’s refrain succinctly captures the underlying message of top-down control over the collective psyche of a highly-polarized and politically divided nation.

*“Konna u għadna ngħixu  
F’pajjiż tal-Mikimaww  
Fejn ta’ fuq jiġbdu l-ispaga  
U aħna l-pupazzi nimmarċjaw”<sup>iii</sup>*

This contemporary Maltese expression reflects the pejorative use of the name of Mickey Mouse in language. According to Collins Dictionary, it is a slang phrase that stands for something which is deemed to be ineffective, trivial and insignificant. Within the Maltese context, the term *pajjiż tal-mickey mouse* is often used to despise a wide array of political wrongdoings, including double-standards of what constitutes right or wrong; lack of accountability by the elites to shoulder responsibility for their own actions; smokescreen consultation exercises wherein decisions have already been taken a priori; preferential treatment among those who are closer to the corridors of power at the expense of all the rest; and serious

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<sup>iii</sup> [Translation] We have been living and still are  
in a Mickey Mouse country  
where those on top pull the string  
and we puppets march ahead.

deficiencies in law enforcement. These sentiments are not mere public perceptions, but they do portray murky realities that loom beyond political rhetoric. For example, in 2020 the Maltese Prime Minister decided to include for the very first time the responsibility of law enforcement within the portfolio of a specific ministry, namely the Ministry for Home Affairs, National Security and *Law Enforcement* in an attempt to address protracted *mickey mouse* compliance.

**vi. Biex timxi 'l quddiem trid qaddis fis-sema u ieħor fl-art** – To succeed, you need a saint in heaven and another on earth

This proverb encapsulates the innate culture of patronage and clientelism which is extremely predominant within the Maltese political and social fabric. Furthermore, it evokes the connections and connotations resulting from religion and politics where sacred invocations are often complemented with supplications for a direct intervention from temporal authorities. The complementarity of heavenly saints and earthly protectors is manifested in other similar idioms and expressions that are still widely spoken, like for example in the following two cases:

a. **ghandu xi qaddis** – he must surely have a saint.

This adage incites suspicion that the person did get what he wanted because of some veiled interference from a politician or an elite officer.

b. **mingħajr il-qaddisin ma titlax il-ġenna** – you cannot go to heaven without saints.

This is another traditional saying expressing the shared experience that one cannot satisfy his needs and accomplish his/her aspirations without pleading for political support and intercession.

Political patronage neutralizes the values of good governance rooted in justice, transparency, accountability, meritocracy and universality. Instead, it breeds nepotism and corrupt practices wherein those that are within the inner circles of politicians reap the benefits of their own proximity to power elites. Pirotta claims that the Maltese electoral mechanism based on the Single Transferable Vote incubates an ecosystem wherein patron-client linkages can thrive (Vassallo, 2021). Politicians are often willing to compromise their integrity and intervene to hand a discriminatory advantage to their electorate; thus, ascertain their Parliamentary seat in the election. On their part, voters habitually threaten and blackmail political candidates, intimidating them that they will not vote for if they are not given what they asked for. When elected, the politician becomes the second patron for the villagers; the first one watch over them from its niche in the church and the second one protects them from his ministerial/parliamentary office. Lino Spiteri (1938-2014), an eminent politician, asserted that “*Our southern Mediterranean mentality, and (a false) dependence on the “above” – expecting government to play god – make for and also fuel further patronage*” (Salib, 2007, 43).

One might argue that political patronage and clientelism are present in every territory: large and small, island and mainland, sovereign and colony, authoritarian and democratic, affluent and poor, developed and underdeveloped. However small state literature provides corroborated evidence that smallness, islandness and remoteness tend to accentuate the proliferation, effects and implications of both patronage and clientelism (Thorhallsson, 2000; Pirotta, 1996; Boissevain, 1993; Katzenstein, 1984).

**vii. Min jikkmanda jagħmel il-liġi** (those who are in command make the law)

This is another proverb that confronts those enjoying political power who, after all, are the only ones to draft, make and enforce laws. The Maltese rendition is a faithful translation of the Italian version, *Chi comanda fa la legge*. The proverb implies that those who make laws do their utmost to preserve their advantageous positions and secure expediency to conveniently serve their own interests to the detriment of the rest of society who are not acquainted to the intersecting circles of power. Over the centuries, the Maltese were always sceptical about new legislation because it was deemed by the populace as a mere instrument to retain power in the hands of the foreign ruler who had little or no appetite to delegate part of his authority to the locals. The Knights of Saint John (1530-1798) adopted a paternalistic style of government which did not allow any degree of political autonomy to the Maltese, whereas the British (1800-1964) ruled with a dictatorial attitude to guarantee the safety of their fortress colony; thus, allowing very little space and opportunity for Maltese politicians to give their share in governing domestic affairs.

The reluctance of foreign sovereigns to delegate any inch of power to the locals, together with the unwillingness of the Maltese representatives to consult the people on matters of policy and legislation, propelled a sense of complacency and helplessness among the commoners who had to accept whatever legislation was tabled by the Grand Council of the Knights or by the British Governor's Office. The alienation of the locals from any influence over domestic and international affairs is further solidified by another proverbial saying that was extremely popular during World War II (1940-1943) when the Maltese used to intone, "*Mussolini jagħmel diskors għaliex gwerra jrid bilfors*" (Mussolini delivers a speech because he is adamant about war) (Vassallo 2016, 45). The incantation makes reference to Benito Mussolini's speech on 10th June 1940 at 6:00pm from Palazzo Venezia in Rome from where he declared war on Great Britain and France. The day after, the first air raids by the *aeronautica Italiana* were registered on military radars and the Maltese grieved the first victims of war. Once again, history has taught the Maltese that they had no voice in war and peace, in famine or prosperity, in security or exposure to danger.

The proverb *Min jikkmanda jagħmel il-liġi* surpassed the test of time and is still frequently used in contemporary times characterized by white papers, social dialogue and extensive exercises of public consultations. Fieldwork research shows evidence that many individuals and civil society groups accuse government authorities that the various discussion sessions which are constantly held are not more than mere smokescreens and feigned processes to appease the requirements of the European Union (Vassallo, 2015).

**viii. Mingħand Kajfa għalghand Pilatu** (from Caiaphas to Pilate)

A commonly-used figure of speech to express the frustration of the Maltese when they suffer from excessive bureaucracy and lengthy processes. This aphorism is rooted in the evangelical episodes leading to the arrest, trial and condemnation of Jesus. On the one hand, it refers to Jewish high priest Joseph ben Caiaphas who masterminded the plot to kill Jesus. On the other hand, it relates to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who presided over the trial of Jesus and later ordered his crucifixion. On the night and day of the infamous trial, neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities were prepared to take the ultimate responsibility for the elimination of Jesus. In the narrative of all the canonical gospels, Jesus is first taken to the Sanhedrin which

serves as the Jewish judicial body. In accordance to John's gospel, Jesus is first taken to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas and former high priest. Eventually, Jesus is sent from Annas to Caiaphas the high priest for court hearing, and the morning after Jesus was led from Caiaphas to Pontius Pilate in the Praetorium. Pilate hesitated to take the final decision and ordered Jesus to be brought to Herod's court on the premise that the accused was a Galilean and, consequently, falls under Herod's jurisdiction. In the end, Jesus was finally sent back to Pilate who ultimately condemned him to death after publicly washing his hands.

As fervent Catholics, such a court process defined by indecision, mistrust, qualm, procrastination and deceit caught the imagination of the Maltese population. Over the centuries, it acquired a metaphorical meaning to ventilate their anger and weariness whenever they are unjustly treated by the authorities, including the Public Service. Conscious of the red tape that has engulfed the public administration over the years, a renewal drive was triggered in the Maltese Public Service in 2014 to render it more efficient, effective and customer orientated (Cutajar, 2021). Among others, the Renewal Agenda included such initiatives as online services, reduction of bureaucratic procedures, decentralized HR functions, simplification of financial regulations, streamlined public procurement, quality improvement mechanisms, the launch of one-stop shops and the introduction of key performance indicators.

#### **ix. Kappell ma jmejjilx lill-ieħor** (A hat does not bow to another hat)

In Maltese, proverbs that speak of elites in society and politics are abundant; many of which express thumbs down to the few, privileged ones who lead the masses. Prevalent sayings featuring the elites often ascribe them with contempt, aloofness and egocentricity. The one being mentioned here mocks the spirit of collegiality among professionals, specialists, authorities and politicians. Their professional and, sometimes, legalistic companionship among the inner circles of authority is not deemed by the commoners as an instrument for the elites to share responsibility and expertise, but as a justification to escape accountability for their own wrongdoings or for their unapproachability to the general public. The proverbial tenet maintains that an elite never opts to correct, apprehend, scold or penalize another fellow elite, particularly if they belong to the same profession or political party. However, they do not have any qualms to blame John Citizen when he commits an insignificant impropriety or a minor offence. Other proverbs consolidate these two weights, two measures syndrome, as in the case of *Il-forka għaż-żghir* (the gallows is for the commoner) or in its variant form, *Il-forka għall-iżvinturat qiegħda* (the gallows is meant for the ill-starred).

However, the Maltese are not only able to restrain their disdain towards the elites in order to live and let live under their direction and influence, but also treat the latter as a necessary evil to secure their own existence and survival. Experience has taught them that they need to come to terms with the upper class and the powerful ones, even though they look down on the commoners and consider them as inferiors and simple auxiliaries to preserve their advantageous positions. In this respect, one can refer to a number of proverbs that convey this uneasy and compromised relationship between the few who lead and the many who are led, like for example *Iddardarx l-għajn li tixrob minnha* (don't muddle the fountain from which you drink), *jilgħaq sorm xi hadd* (the need to lick someone's arse) and *tbus l-id li trid maqtugħa* (kiss the hand that you wish to cut off). Some of these proverbial dictums are voiced in other languages including

English, but they all point to the underlying social tensions within the different strata of society. These tensions are prompted by contempt and arrogance between the few who belong to the top-tier and the many others who are destined to the lower end without any prospect for social mobility. At the same time, these societal and political tensions are disguised under a feigning harmony that allows for the exploitation of one group over the other, both top-down and also bottom-up.

**x. Il-ħuta minn rasha tinten** (The fish head is the first to rot)

An archetypal proverb denouncing the elites who are deemed by the commoners as the first to set a bad example and bend the moral compass in favor of their selfish interests. Eventually, their depraved attitudes and actions cascade down the various layers of societal fabric until whole groups or communities are contaminated. This proverb is found in other languages, including German (*Der Fish stinkt vom Kopf her*), Italian (*Il pesce puzza dalla testa*) and Sicilian (*Lu pisci feti di la testa*) and all express a similar meaning. Similar proverbs are voiced by the Turks, Slovenians and Greeks (Spagnol, 2018).

If we accept the definition that a proverb is a metaphorical saying that expresses a perceived truth based on common sense or experience, then we must admit that our ancestors were always extremely skeptical of those who hold positions of authority. This antipathy may have been triggered by the fact that the rulers were exclusively foreigners (namely, the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the feudal lords, the Knights, the French and the English), who were patently supported by a tiny privileged class of local nobles and elites to administer the islands. Many a time, the latter had to compromise the interests of their fellow Maltese to gain and retain their public office made available to them by the governing potentates. Having been a servitude colony for centuries, the Maltese have logically nurtured an anthropological divide between ‘*ġewwieni-barrani*’ (local-foreigner) and, since the cultivation of the domestic political class in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, this native divide has evolved into “*ahna-huma*” (us-them), where every domestic political development has been managed by confrontation and “*internecine rivalry*” (Warrington, 2012; Frendo, 2013).

The lack of trust of the Maltese in persons of authority is not singularly reserved to politicians since it is also frequently directed towards other protagonists of the establishment, including the Catholic Church, the business class and the media. This political ambience creates fertile ground where the elites are rebuked for their dishonesty and self-serving attitudes which, consequently, are often in disregard of the truth or the interests of others (Vassallo 2018, 2). In turn, these sentiments incubate populist movements which are composed of “*thin ideology that merely sets up a framework divided into two irreconcilable parts: that of a pure people versus a corrupt elite*” (The Economist, 2016).

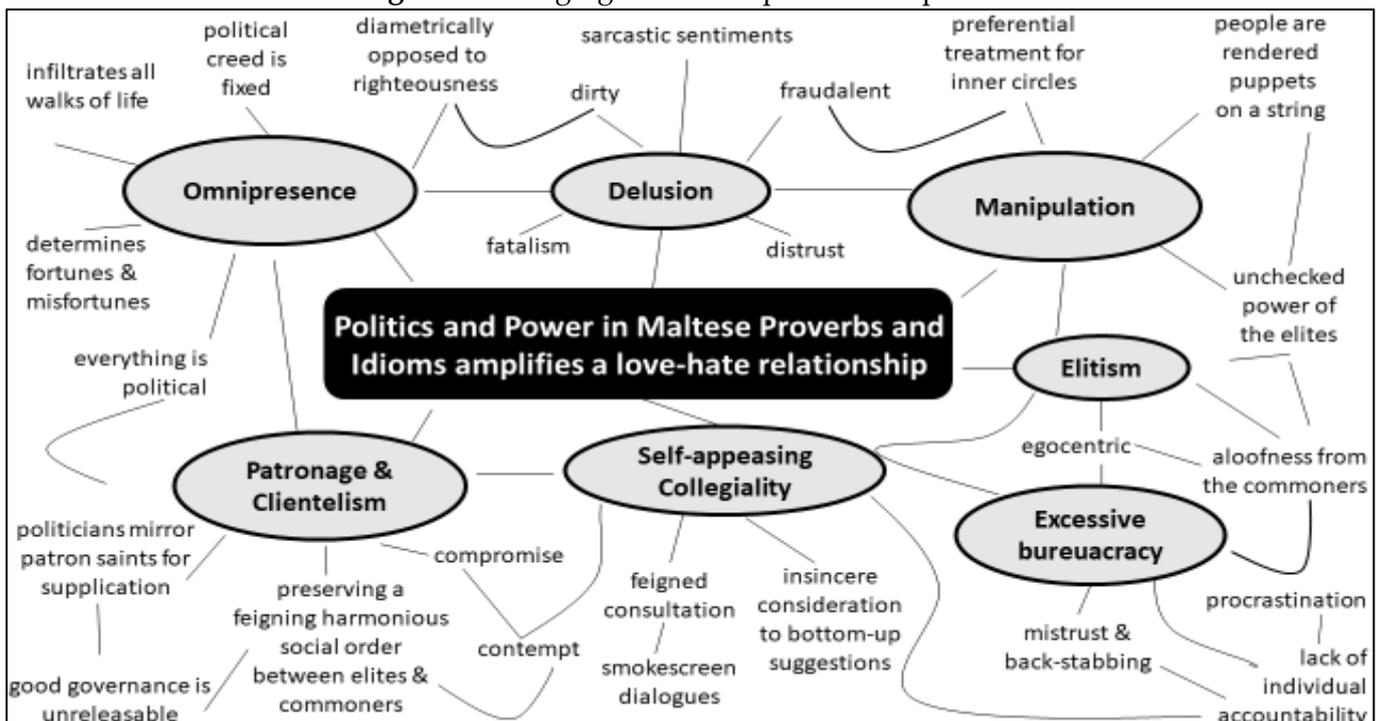
### **Mapping themes and inferences**

The ten selected proverbs and idioms that were analysed in this study catalyse a wide and diversified array of themes that reveal the way how the Maltese perceive politics and power. Comprehensively, they convey a love-hate attitude between those who lead and the rest who are expected to follow. Although conscious of the dirtiness and delusions of politics, the Maltese

have long understood that political manoeuvring is a necessary evil to ascertain their existence, survival and, possibly, prosperity. To this effect, they are less likely to express frustration and dissent in public but rather opt to make uneasy compromises with the power elites to secure favours and preferential treatments. Such an anthropological fabric breeds a corrupt ambience where political patronage and clientelism thrive to the extent that the domestic populace is willing to twist truth, bend moral principles and accept a feigning collective harmony to preserve the self-appeasing status-quo. Street wisdom has taught the Maltese that the elites often go unchecked when exercising their power but, at the same time, they are not bothered by the harassment of the principles of good governance as long as they continue to profit from the manipulation of power structures and games. Contrastingly, the commoners lament their exasperation against the aloof and privileged who only think of their immediate interests, while excluding the rest from the festering fountain of nepotism and favoritism.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, the author identified sets of inferences, coded them under ensuing themes, reviewed their interlinkages and, eventually, categorized their nature and associations as exhibited in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Emerging themes on politics and power



(Source: author (2021))

Following an inductive inquiry stemming from the explanations rolled out in this study, the resulting mapping yielded seven cross-cutting themes, namely:

- **Omnipresence** – politics is everywhere and there is no way how one can escape it. It determines the fortunes and downfalls of the commoners whose political creed is expected to permeate from one generation to another.
- **Delusion** – all connotations in relations to politics are negative, ranging from its dirty nature to fraudulent practices; from distrust to sarcastic/fatalistic sentiments.

Moreover, the Maltese do not distinguish between politics and power; in fact the two terms are used interchangeably.

- **Manipulation** – as a Machavellian instrument, power ‘uses’ people and renders them as mere puppets on a string. Yet the Maltese do not usually rebel against the status quo as they have learnt how to manoeuvre the strings to their own advantage, thus engineering preferential treatment.
- **Elitism** – Long centuries of foreign rule have moulded the Maltese into an enduring nation that persevered under autocratic and egocentric elitists. This perception transcends time as contemporary domestic elites are often deemed to be likewise detached from the needs of the people.
- **Excessive bureaucracy** – Bureaucracy is perceived to be the home ground where experts and professionals perform their functions. Traditionally, this privileged circle is hated for its inefficiencies, procrastination, ambiguity, back-stabbing and lack of personal and collective accountability.
- **Self-appeasing collegiality** – If there is a political feature that the Maltese really loathe, it is indeed self-indulgence. In their tireless efforts to conserve their power, the elites exploit feigned consultations processes and smokescreen dialogues to satisfy domestic and European legal obligations while, at the same time, maintain their influence and authority.
- **Patronage and clientelism** – Although counterproductive to the principles and virtues of good governance, the Maltese make their utmost to incubate and nurture partisan political benefaction and supplication to elevate their needs above those of the rest who are alien to the concentric circles of power. This is what the Maltese idiom refers to when it is said *ħbieb tal-ħbieb* (friends of friends).

## Conclusion

Proverbial and idiomatic expressions do not only enrich the language, diversify its applications through figures of speech and augments the ‘living’ folkloristic heritage of generations past but, above all, they serve as an anthropological instrument to portray the identity, culture and collective frame of mind of a society. In the case of proverbs, they convey moral advices on how to accept or deal with various facts of life. This study was exclusively focused on Maltese proverbs and idioms that revolve around power politics and control. The examination of the selected ten proverbs and idioms leads to a conclusion embracing ontological realism in which Maltese observations and judgements are rooted. “*The wit of one and the wisdom of many*” has organically led them to affirm their conviction that power manipulation, greed and elite collegiality, distortion of political virtues and exploitation of power games to the leverage of both the disadvantaged and the privileged are universal realities. In other words, these phenomena involving power and politics exist independently of the locals’ perceptions or interpretations. This conviction supports Philip’s definition of philosophical realism which sustains “the view that entities [or ideas] exist independently of being perceived, or independently of our theories about them” (Philip 1985: 205). Consequentially, the large majority of the resulting themes and inferences in this study are echoed in proverbs and idioms which are present not only in

Mediterranean and European countries but as far as in the United States and Australia. Their universality is imprinted not only across space but also across time as many of these sayings have been coined under colonial times but are still reminiscent in contemporary times characterized by globalization, democracy and the digital age.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

### **About the Author**

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