

The Labour Party, which has been in power for nine years, is the favourite in the 26 March legislative elections in Malta

On 20 February, Maltese Prime Minister, Robert Abela (Labour Party, PL) announced that the next general elections would be held on 26 March. The Maltese are being called to renew the members of the House of Representatives, the single chamber of Parliament.

For the first time, young people aged between 16 and 18 will be able to vote in this type of election. They were already able to fulfil their civic duty in the last local and European elections on 25 May 2019. The electoral law has also been amended to allow the implementation of a system to increase the number of women elected to parliament.

The election campaign has been the shortest allowed by the Constitution, lasting five weeks. Voters who have to respect quarantine will be able to vote from their cars in four additional polling stations that will be made available to them.

With one week to go before the vote, the archipelago, whose inhabitants are always very interested in politics, is not really in the grip of election fever, mainly because of concerns about the war in Ukraine and probably also because of the coronavirus epidemic, which has not yet been stamped out. Malta is very dependent on Ukraine, but also on Russia, for its consumption of wheat, corn and barley. Robert Abela's government has assured that it will subsidise the energy consumption of its compatriots.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the Malta Today Institute and published on 20 March, the Labour Party will win 55.1% of the vote, and the Nationalist Party (PN) 43.5%. It is therefore expected that 26 March will mark the third consecutive victory for Labour.

NINE YEARS OF LABOUR GOVERNMENT

Robert Abela has led Malta since 13 January 2020, the day after he was appointed chairman of the Labour Party, a position that automatically made him the incumbent Prime Minister. He succeeded Joseph Muscat, who was forced out on the arrest of businessman Yorgen Fenech, accused of complicity in the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was working on the Malta Files and killed when her booby-trapped car exploded on 16 October 2017 in Bidnija.

Between November 2019 and January 2020, numerous protests were organised in Malta in response to the revelations made about the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, which uncovered links between Keith Schembri, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat's chief of staff, and a Dubai-based company, *17 Black*, involved in the case of the Panama Papers. The CEO of the latter, Yorgen Fenech, was arrested on 20 November 2019 while trying to flee the archipelago. Protesters demanded the resignation of the government and Joseph Muscat, suspected of interfering in the investigation, eventually stepped down on 1 December of that year.

In 2017, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, already under attack from Daphne Caruana Galizia, called early parliamentary elections. The blogger had revealed that Chief of Staff Keith Schembri and Energy Minister Konrad Mizzi (PL) were the respective owners of Hearnville Inc and Tillgate Inc, two Panamanian

General elections in Malta

26th March 2022

offshore companies, which they had acquired through the Maltese law firm Nexia BT thanks to their Panamanian colleague Mossack Fonseca, who had been involved in the Panama Papers scandal (the firm was accused of having helped foreign citizens and companies to defraud their national tax administrations). Joseph Muscat refused to sanction the two men, causing the anger of his compatriots against him and leading thousands of people to demonstrate against his government. Nevertheless, the Labour Party won the legislative elections on 3 June 2017 with 55.04% of the vote, ahead of the Nationalist Party, which won 42.12%.

In February 2021, a dozen Maltese personalities were arrested and imprisoned in the investigation into the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia.

Head of government Robert Abela is campaigning on his management of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is considered to have been quite good by his compatriots if opinion polls are to be believed, and also on Malta's economic results, where there has been strong growth and has a low level of unemployment. He is undoubtedly benefiting from what is known as the "*rally around the flag*" phenomenon, which comprises supporting the incumbent leader in times of crisis.

Robert Abela announced at the beginning of February that the government would give a cheque for €100 to every student and worker in Malta and a cheque of €200 to every pensioner and welfare recipient.

Among the five main promises of the Labour Party's election programme are the investment of €700 million to create green spaces in urban environments; a reduction in taxes; a reduction in corporate tax rates; an increase in retirement pensions; a guarantee of free medication; and a €10,000 grant for first-time property buyers.

However, the Labour Party is still highly criticised for its governance and its management of the rule of law. Several Labour officials are facing corruption charges. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), an international consortium of investigative journalists, named the former head of government, Joseph Muscat, 2019 Man of the Year for organised crime and corruption. Similarly, the Financial Action

Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental body for combating money laundering and terrorist financing, has blacklisted Malta.

After the invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin's armed forces, the Maltese government waited a long time before suspending its grants of golden passports to Russian citizens, a measure that constituted an important source of revenue for Malta.

AN OPPOSITION THAT STRUGGLES TO CONVINC

The nationalists know that they are the outsiders in the 26 March elections. Nevertheless, they are trying to convince voters of the need for a political changeover by all means. However, Bernard Grech's party is struggling to assert itself as an alternative political force. Nine years of opposition have not been enough for the nationalists to unite around a project. The party has had three leaders since the last legislative elections on 3 June 2017. Three months after the elections, Simon Busuttil resigned from his post with the entire executive committee of the Nationalist Party. He was succeeded by Adrian Delia, who was forced to resign after being indicted in several corruption cases and also in a domestic violence case. Bernard Grech replaced him in October 2020. More than a year later, internal tensions within the party remain high.

The nationalists have identified ten economic sectors in which they wish to invest €1 billion to strengthen the Maltese economy. Furthermore, Bernard Grech has constantly denounced the government's record of governance, reproaching it for its failure to respect the rule of law, stating, "*Malta is run by a criminal organisation*".

THE MALTESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Since Malta's independence on 21 September 1964, only two political parties have won seats in Parliament: the Labour Party (PL), positioned on the left of the political spectrum, and the Nationalist Party (PN), situated on the right. The two parties oppose each other on issues such as Europe, taxation and privatisation. In the archipelago, partisan divisions are strong and voters' loyalty to their party is high. Finally, the Maltese

are by far the most numerous among Europeans to go to the polls at every election, without any obligation to vote.

The Maltese parliament is unicameral. The House of Representatives elected on 3 June 2017 comprised 67 MPs, elected in thirteen constituencies (five MPs per constituency, but additional MPs may be allocated to match the share of the electorate's vote with the number of party seats, which must always be an odd number) for up to five years under a complex voting system (a multi-mandate proportional representation system known as the single transferable vote system) that the island has shared since 1921 with only two countries in the world: Ireland and Australia. Several reforms have been envisaged to simplify this voting system. All in vain. In 1987 and 1996, several amendments were nevertheless adopted, notably to ensure that the party with the highest number of first choices would obtain a majority. On 12 December 1981, the Nationalist Party came first in the parliamentary elections but obtained fewer seats than the Labour Party, which led to a political crisis in the archipelago.

In parliamentary elections, the voter ranks those he or she wishes to elect in order of preference on the alphabetical list of candidates. The voter places the number 1 in front of his or her first choice, then 2, 3, 4, etc. in front of the names of the other candidates on the list. The first counting operation is the calculation of the electoral quotient (the Hagenbach-Bischoff quotient), i.e. the minimum number of votes that a candidate must obtain to be elected. This quotient is the total number of votes cast divided by the number of seats to be filled in each constituency, increased by one. Any candidate reaching this number of votes is declared elected. The surplus votes are then distributed among the candidates who were selected as second choice. The candidates with the lowest scores are eliminated and the votes they won are transferred to the remaining candidates in the next order of preference on the ballot. The same process is repeated until there are no more seats to be filled.

Candidates may run in up to two constituencies. If they are elected in both, they choose which one they will represent at the end of the election. Vacant seats are distributed through a so-called ad hoc election before the first session of the House of Representatives (which must take place within two months of the announcement of the results). Any unsuccessful candidate in the election can stand for the ad hoc election in his or her constituency. However, in practice, only candidates from the party that left the seat vacant participate in the election (so that the overall result remains unchanged).

Anyone wishing to stand as a candidate in the parliamentary elections is required to secure the support of at least four people in their constituency and to pay a deposit of €90, which is refunded if they get more than one-tenth of the electoral quota.

Maltese living abroad must return home to vote in the parliamentary elections. The airline Air Malta charts flights so that they can fulfil their civic duty.

In Malta, donations to political parties and election campaigns are anonymous (in Europe, only Denmark and Andorra still guarantee this anonymity). There is no law obliging political parties to make their accounts public.

Finally, the Maltese parliament elects the President of the Republic of Malta for a five-year term; the latter has few powers and the function is essentially honorary. The current head of state, George Vella (PL), was elected on 2 April 2019.

2 political parties are represented in the current House of Representatives:

- the Labour Party (PL), a social-democratic party founded in 1920 and led by outgoing Prime Minister Robert Abela, has 37 deputies;
- the Nationalist Party (PN), a Christian-Democratic party founded in 1880 and led by Bernard Grech, has 30 seats.

General elections in Malta

26th March 2022

04

Reminder of the results of 3rd June 2017 parliamentary elections in Malta**Turnout: 92.06%**

Political parties	Number of votes won	Percentage of votes won	Number of seats
Labour Party (PL)	170 976	55.04	37
Nationalist Party (PN)	130 850	42.12	28
Democratic Party (PD)	4 846	1.56	2
Democratic Alternative (AD)	2 564	0.83	0
Maltese Patriotic Movement (MPM)	1 117	0.36	0
Alliance for Change (AB)	221	0.07	0
Independents	91	0.03	0

Source: <https://electoral.gov.mt/ElectionResults/General>

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