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# The Politics of Malta

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## Introduction

Political systems are the foundation upon which societies are built, defining not only the mechanisms of governance but also the contours of civic identity, social order, and public discourse. In Malta, a nation renowned for its rich tapestry of history, vibrant culture, and strategic location in the heart of the Mediterranean, politics is both a reflection of its complex past and a driver of its evolving future. "The Politics of Malta: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Malta" aims to offer a clear, comprehensive, and accessible guide to understanding the structures, key players, challenges, and dynamics of the Maltese political landscape.

Since achieving independence from the United Kingdom in 1964, Malta has developed a robust parliamentary republic, strongly influenced by its colonial legacy while simultaneously charting its own unique path. The evolution from constitutional monarchy to republic, and the subsequent amendments that have defined the balance of power, electoral mechanisms, and political neutrality, all form part of Malta's intricate constitutional mosaic. Unpacking these constitutional developments is crucial to understanding both the strengths and vulnerabilities of the current system.

Malta's government structure, based on a clear separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches, is distinguished by a blend of British, Napoleonic, and Mediterranean influences. This book delves into the practical realities of how these branches operate, the role of the President, the functions of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the interplay between government institutions and ordinary citizens. The Maltese electoral system, based on proportional representation and the single transferable vote, is a unique feature that shapes the nature of political competition, party dominance, and voter engagement.

Central to Malta's political culture are its two dominant parties: the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party. Their competition for power, combined with the particularities of party financing, electoral reform, and the challenges faced by smaller parties, creates a dynamic if sometimes polarized political environment. Local government, introduced in the early 1990s, has brought politics closer to the community, adding another layer to the Maltese political system.

In addition to the institutional framework, this book addresses the pressing challenges and debates that are at the forefront of Malta's political agenda. Issues such as good governance, rule of law, overpopulation, economic pressures, and Malta's engagement with the European Union all impact the daily lives of citizens and the choices made by political leaders. The ongoing discourse about reform, transparency, and the future direction of the country is essential for anyone seeking not just to understand Malta's

politics, but to participate in it.

By tracing the historical context, institutional structures, and current realities of Maltese politics, this book aspires to be both a reference and a guide for students, researchers, professionals, and all those interested in the evolving story of Malta's democracy. Whether you are a newcomer to Maltese political life or a seasoned observer, "The Politics of Malta" will provide the tools and insights needed to navigate and appreciate the complexities of governance on this remarkable island nation.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Evolution of Maltese Politics

Malta, a tiny archipelago in the heart of the Mediterranean, boasts a history far grander than its size might suggest. Its strategic location, a stepping stone between Europe and North Africa, has made it a coveted prize for numerous powers throughout the millennia. This constant flux of rulers and influences has sculpted not only the islands' rich cultural identity but also the very foundations of their political system. To understand the politics of modern Malta, we must first embark on a journey through its captivating past, tracing the echoes of empires and the stirrings of self-determination.

Long before the familiar political parties of today, Malta was shaped by civilizations whose names now reside in history books. The islands' story begins in prehistory, with evidence of human habitation dating back thousands of years. However, our political narrative truly begins with the arrival of the Phoenicians around 700 BC. These skilled mariners and traders from the Levant recognized Malta's potential as a vital outpost along their extensive trade routes across the Mediterranean. They established settlements, notably at what is now Mdina, and left an indelible mark, including influencing the very name "Malta," which is thought to derive from a Phoenician word meaning "shelter" or "harbor". While the Phoenicians were primarily interested in trade, their presence marked the islands' entry into a wider political and economic sphere.

Following the decline of Phoenician influence, Malta came under the control of Carthage, a powerful Phoenician colony in North Africa, around the mid-6th century BC. Carthage solidified Malta's role as a naval base and integrated the islands more firmly into its burgeoning empire. This period, often referred to as the Punic period, saw a continuation and evolution of the Phoenician culture, blending with local traditions. The Punic Wars, a series of conflicts between Rome and Carthage, eventually brought about another significant shift in Malta's history. In 218 BC, during the Second Punic War, Malta fell to the rising power of the Roman Republic.

Under Roman rule, Malta, known as Melita, became part of the province of Sicily. The Romans recognized the islands' strategic importance for controlling trade routes and establishing a military presence in the central Mediterranean. While not considered a colony in the traditional sense, Malta prospered under Roman administration, with improvements in infrastructure, including roads and public buildings. Latin became the official language, influencing the development of the Maltese language, although the local Punic-Hellenistic culture and language are believed to have persisted for some time. The islands even had their own local senate and people's assembly by the 1st

century AD, indicating a degree of local governance within the Roman framework.

Christianity was introduced to Malta, famously through the shipwreck of St. Paul in 60 AD, which had a profound and lasting impact on the islands' religious identity. Malta remained part of the Roman Empire until the early 6th century AD, when it came under the control of the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine period lasted until the 9th century, although details about this era in Malta are somewhat sparse.

A more transformative period began in 870 AD with the Arab conquest of Malta. The Aghlabid dynasty from Tunisia took control, introducing significant changes that left an enduring legacy, particularly on the Maltese language, which is the only Semitic language written in Latin script. The Arabs introduced new agricultural techniques, such as irrigation systems, and crops like citrus fruits, which greatly impacted the islands' economy and landscape. While some historical accounts suggest a period where the islands were sparsely populated after the initial conquest, Arab influence on place names and cultural practices remains evident today.

In 1091, the Normans, led by Count Roger I of Sicily, invaded Malta, marking the beginning of a gradual shift back to Christian rule. Full Norman control was established by 1127, and Malta became part of the Kingdom of Sicily for nearly 440 years. This period saw the re-establishment of the Catholic Church and increased immigration from Sicily and southern Italy, contributing to the islands' cultural and demographic makeup. Malta was subsequently ruled by a succession of European powers as a Sicilian fief, including the Swabians, Angevins, and Aragonese, before becoming part of the Spanish Empire.

A pivotal moment in Malta's history arrived in 1530 when Emperor Charles V granted the islands to the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, also known as the Knights Hospitaller. The Knights, a military-religious order, had been expelled from Rhodes by the Ottoman Empire and needed a new base. Their rule transformed Malta into a formidable Christian stronghold in the Mediterranean. The Knights fortified the islands extensively, most notably constructing the city of Valletta, named after Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette, who led the Knights and the Maltese to victory against the Ottoman Turks in the Great Siege of 1565. The Knights' rule, lasting over 250 years, left an indelible mark on Malta's architecture, culture, and identity, although it was not a period of democratic governance.

The Knights' long rule came to an abrupt end in 1798 with the arrival of Napoleon Bonaparte and the French fleet. Napoleon, on his way to Egypt, seized Malta with relative ease. The French embarked on a series of reforms, including abolishing nobility, slavery, and the Inquisition, and introducing concepts like legal equality and public education. However, their rule was short-lived and deeply unpopular, largely due to the plundering of church treasures and the imposition of heavy taxes. The Maltese people rebelled, and with the assistance of the British, the French were

expelled in 1800.

Malta then voluntarily became a British protectorate, a status that was formalized in 1814 with the Treaty of Paris, making Malta a British Crown Colony. British rule, which lasted for over 150 years, profoundly shaped Malta's political and administrative structures, laying the groundwork for a parliamentary system. Malta's strategic location became even more crucial for the British, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, transforming the islands into a vital naval base. While British rule brought infrastructure development and integration into a global empire, it also saw periods of social and economic hardship.

The path towards self-governance and eventual independence was a gradual one under British rule. The first steps towards representative government were taken in the 19th century, although full self-government was not granted until 1921. This self-governing status was, however, subject to suspensions and revocations by the British authorities. The Maltese people's aspirations for greater autonomy grew stronger, particularly after their resilience and strategic importance during World War II, for which the island was awarded the George Cross.

Finally, on September 21, 1964, Malta achieved independence from the United Kingdom, becoming a constitutional monarchy with Queen Elizabeth II as the head of state. This was a momentous occasion, marking the end of centuries of foreign rule and the beginning of a new era of self-determination. A decade later, on December 13, 1974, Malta transitioned to a republic within the Commonwealth, with a Maltese President as the head of state. The last British forces left Malta in 1979, commemorated as Freedom Day. Since gaining independence, Malta has continued to evolve its political system, navigating the challenges and opportunities of being a small island nation in a complex world, culminating in its membership of the European Union in 2004.

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