

Malta: Masses take to the streets demanding resignation of Prime Minister Muscat

By Marianne Arens
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Masses of people have taken to the streets on the island of Malta to demand the resignation of the country's prime minister following the murder of the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. Caruana Galizia, an anti-corruption activist and investigative journalist, was the victim of a targeted murder in October 2017.

She died following the detonation of bomb placed inside her car. The explosion of the radio-controlled bomb hurled the vehicle off the road and tore the 53-year-old woman's body to pieces. A huge fireball burned everything in a few seconds.

Towards the end of November angry crowds had gathered in the Maltese capital of Valletta to demand the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Joseph Muscat.

On December 1 Muscat then announced that his Partit Laburista (Labor Party, PL), the social democratic party of Malta, had agreed new elections for January 12, and that he would resign in the run-up to the election. This announcement, however, only fuelled the anger of the crowd. People held up posters demanding: "Muscat has to go. He has blood on his hands." Thousands bore the photo of Daphne Galizia and others held posters bearing the text "Mafia" and "Shame." Young protesters threw eggs at the prime minister's official auto.

Activists from the "Graffiti" group have since occupied government buildings, beating drums and shouting "Mafia" and "criminals." "It is no longer just about corruption, but about political murder," the activists shouted.

At the start of this month, the family of the journalist filed a lawsuit demanding that the head of government, Joseph Muscat, be kept out of all investigations. They fear that he would hamper investigations and destroy evidence. The family has now joined the chorus of those calling for his immediate resignation.

Muscat's closest co-workers and several ministers resigned at the end of November following the arrest of Muscat's chief of staff, businessman Keith Schembri. Shortly after the attack, there were suspicions that the government was involved in what was obviously a contract killing. Now these suspicions have been confirmed.

Businessman Yorgen Fenech has also been charged and his accounts and assets frozen. On November 20, naval police arrested the billionaire as he was attempting to flee Malta on his luxury yacht. He is accused of conspiring to form a criminal organisation and participating in that organisation's crimes. In a futile attempt to gain leniency, Fenech is alleged to have incriminated Muscat's

chief of staff Keith Schembri, declaring him to be the instigator of the murder.

The journalist Daphne Galizia was well known and respected in Malta for her journalistic work. The media outlet *P olitico* described her as a "one-woman WikiLeaks." She had systematically researched the extent of corruption and money laundering by the island's financial and business elite. Her blog, with 400,000 followers, had a larger readership than all of the newspapers in Malta put together.

In 2016, Galizia played a key role in uncovering Maltese ties to the Panama Papers. This scandal uncovered the enormous extent of tax evasion by the super-rich around the world based on 11 million leaked documents. Galizia uncovered mailbox companies in Panama belonging to the former Maltese energy and current tourism minister, Konrad Mizzi, and Muscat's right-hand man Keith Schembri. Both men, like Muscat himself, are prominent Labour Party leaders.

The letterbox companies were founded shortly after the Labour Party took office in 2013, with six-figure amounts paid out each month. Another mailbox company led to Muscat's wife, Michelle Muscat.

The revelations turned out to be politically explosive with implications reaching far beyond Malta. On January 1, 2017, Muscat assumed the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, with the EU relying on Muscat as an important partner, both in negotiating Brexit and in enforcing the EU's homicidal refugee policy. Muscat responded to the revelations by calling early elections, which he won, together with his party, on June 3, 2017. Nothing stood in the way of a second term in office.

This did not prevent Daphne Galizia, however, from publishing further blogs and detailed articles. She revealed that a criminal conspiracy rooted deep inside the government had turned Malta into a self-service centre for money laundering and tax evasion.

Shortly after taking office in 2013, the LP government placed an order for a new gas power plant. Malta's biggest ever public construction project has three owners: the holding ElectroGas Malta, the state energy authority of Azerbaijan and the German company Siemens. The entrepreneur Yorgen Fenech, who made his fortune with casinos, hotels and luxury real estate, also sat on the ElectroGas board of directors.

As for the inhabitants of Malta, they have since had to pay for the operation of the power plant with billions of dollars in the form of taxes from their wages. At the same time, large sums of money

were systematically used to pay bribes. Based on the Panama Papers the murdered journalist revealed that funds were apparently diverted to Panama through the services of Yorgen Fenech. The money then passed through a company registered in Dubai and owned by Yorgen Fenech named “17 Black.” Month after month, six-figure sums flowed into the ministers’ accounts.

Galizia exposed all of this in detail while she received death threats on almost a daily basis. One day she discovered her dog at her front door with its throat cut. Her house and car were set on fire several times. Politicians from the government, the various parties and opposition overwhelmed the courageous woman with lawsuits in order to ruin her financially. Several lawsuits stemmed from Muscat, but also from the leader of the opposition Nationalist Party, Adrian Delia, whom the journalist also accused of money laundering.

The last post that Galizia finished 20 minutes before her death concerned Muscat’s current chief of staff, businessman Keith Schembri.

“The fraudster Schembri claims not to be a cheater,” she wrote. “In fact, just a few days after Labour’s election victory in 2013, he and Minister Konrad Mizzi ... founded a secret company in Panama ... and searched all over the world for a dodgy bank that would accept them as customers. (In the end, they solved the problem by founding their own shady bank in Malta where they could hide in public.)” The article ends: “Wherever you look, there are swindlers. The situation is desperate.”

Twenty minutes later, Daphne Caruana Galizia was dead, blown up by a car bomb. The first person to discover the body was her eldest son Matthew.

Since then, the surviving family has refused to give any credibility to the Maltese state’s investigation. Galizia’s husband Peter and her sons Matthew, Andrew and Paul accused the government and the prime minister of being behind the attack from the start. When the government of Malta offered a million euro reward for clues leading to the perpetrators, the family refused to participate. Instead they expressed their solidarity with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, at that time confined to the embassy of Ecuador, who had offered a reward of €20,000 for assistance in finding those responsible for Galizia’s murder.

Matthew Galizia, himself a journalist, has since started the “Daphne Project” together with independent international journalists. The project is aimed at investigating the murder and continuing his mother’s research. Two hundred fifty writers have also come forward to publicly criticise the lack of progress on the part of the authorities in finding all the culprits.

Shortly after the explosion, two convicted professional killers, George and Alfred Degiorgio and a third gangster known to the police were arrested. Based on numerous clues such as cell phones being monitored, surveillance films from the harbour, DNA traces on a cigarette, etc., there is no doubt they carried out the assassination, but then the investigation came to a virtual halt. The arrested killers refused to talk and those who targeted the killing remained in the dark.

Only the arrest of a man in another case of money laundering finally shed light on this case. A taxi driver, Melvin Theuma, was arrested at the country’s main airport a month ago. He had around

\$200,000 in his possession. Upon his arrest he offered the authorities a deal. He would make a confession in the Galizia case if given immunity. He then admitted that he had recruited the killers of Galizia on behalf of Fenech, whom he named as his boss.

Then events moved fast. Within a week Fenech was arrested. Fenech in turn accused Keith Schembri as mastermind behind the killing. Schembri then resigned and was arrested. Two other ministers, Konrad Mizzi and Chris Cardona, also handed in their notices. Finally, Muscat announced his plans to resign.

The driving force behind the series of arrests is undoubtedly the growing popular protest movement. The Maltese population has tired of living under a government that not only refuses to solve such a brutal murder, but turns out to be the mastermind behind it. The government has enriched itself since assuming office, turning the island into a paradise for tax evaders, and subjecting every sphere of public life, from the taxi licensing system to the police and the country’s power plant, to corruption.

The concerned comments now voiced in the European media and from the EU headquarters in Brussels are completely hypocritical. The Socialist Group in the EU in particular has systematically covered up for the Labour Party in the Maltese government. The heads of government gathered in the EU have relied on Malta and its head of government Muscat to implement their inhumane refugee policy in the Mediterranean.

At the same time, European companies have benefited from the lawless conditions in Malta. The German Siemens company is involved in the government’s corrupt power plant project. German DAX listed companies such as BMW, BASF and Lufthansa have also benefited from the tax haven in Malta, as the “MaltaFiles” revealed in 2017. Two years earlier, in 2015, the German federal government had awarded Muscat the Federal Cross of Merit.

The Daphne Galizia case is the second in the EU involving the cowardly murder of a journalist. In March 2018, Jan Kuciak and his fiancé were shot in Slovakia—an event that also triggered mass protests across the country and the government’s eventual resignation.

The manner in which journalist Julian Assange is treated in Britain is also significant in this respect: the major imperialist powers, the United States and the UK, are waging a merciless campaign of vengeance against the founder of WikiLeaks, who is now at risk of death in the Belmarsh maximum security prison in London. Only a mass movement of the international working class can prevent and reverse these developments.

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