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Malta had a rollercoaster experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. One moment it was doing exceptionally well. The next moment it became a basket case, the second worst in Europe. It was unlikely that a little island would garner an ongoing attention in the international press when each country was focusing on its pandemic problems at home. For this research, we visited Malta and explored first-hand the dichotomy between official statements and what transpires on the ground during a pandemic. Maltese public policy communications rely on a conduit model where policy messages are sent to the public in a one-way direction. The premise is to persuade the public. However, without a feedback system, the public loses trust in the top-down approach. While the Maltese government goes about making pronouncements, within the country and in the EU, a different reality manifests itself to investigative researchers who keep their ear to the ground. From listening to the public, to following the Maltese press, the evidence mounts that a constructive discussion is warranted in pandemic situations. Pronouncements in the name of ‘science’ can only do so much. Despite all this, in the end, a backroom deal between the Maltese government and vaccine suppliers made the critical difference.

Key Words: Malta, Gozo, islands, pandemic, COVID-19, policy, public health

Introduction

Malta was the poster child of COVID-19 prevention when the first wave hit (Cuschieri *et al.*, 2020). Malta’s ability to keep the lid on the pandemic, when it first broke, earned international admiration. The Commonwealth General Secretary held Malta out ‘as an example to follow’ (Grech Urpani, 2020). The WHO Director for Europe went one step further and said ‘that Malta has done the best in the whole of Europe’ (CDE News, 2020). Cuschieri *et al.* note that ‘Malta is an island and

the potential for containment would have been relatively simple and effective’ (2020:618). However, a different story emerged when tourists were welcomed back, and another peak reared its head again.

The Maltese closed their ports and their only airport early in the pandemic. Malta’s airport is no major hub, compared to airports such as Heathrow, Charles de Gaulle and Schiphol in Europe, and the timing of the airport closure was the critical factor. There is only so much that governments can do in the face of an international

pandemic. Yet, in every country, success or failure is usually attributed to the government of the day even if the control levers are beyond its shores. In Malta, the public health system initially received accolades as if it were responsible for the low number of cases. The initial low case prevalence mystified many, and the President of the Medical Association of Malta wondered whether the dipterous sandfly on the island

may have resulted in the development of an effective evolutionary immune response to most novel zoonotic viruses such as SARS-CoV-2 by means of survival of the fittest possibly over many generations.

Never mind that, by his own admission, nobody has ever managed to isolate coronavirus from arthropods (Balzan, 2020). This hypothesis was subsequently promoted by the national press (Farrugia, 2020), fomenting gossip that many islanders may be immune to the virus. As they watched the pandemic decimate nearby Italy, especially in the North, the Maltese felt emboldened that their island enjoyed considerable immunity. It did not occur to many that it was more due to the early closure of the airport.

Reality on the Ground

Maltese rules and regulations are underpinned by rampant patronage in a society where everyone knows each other and the fear of stepping on one another's toes prevails. The country is driven by a capitalist ideology where making money is a sacrosanct right. Maltese villages are like the Sicilian villages, further to the north, where the rules from Montecitorio Palace rarely make it to the village square. In this environment, tourism drives Malta's economy. Within days of opening the airport during the summer, tourists flooded in, the number of active cases per hundred thousand skyrocketed, and Malta became a European basket case, second only to Spain. Malta had tipped to the other end of the spectrum, this time becoming a poster child for how quickly things can go wrong in a pandemic.

Behind the islands' idyllic scenes and laid-back atmosphere, corruption is rampant in the political sphere (Borg, 2021; Brincat & Cacciottolo, 2020; *Justice for Journalists*, 2020; *The Shift*, 2021). Public policy communications rely on the conduit model where public policy messages are sent to the Maltese public in a one-

way direction. There is next to no feedback. The premise is to persuade the public with political decisions often masked as 'science.' As a result, the public loses trust in a system based on a top-down approach.

Fully aware of the culture on the islands, we decided against using any surveys or formal inquiries for this paper. Instead, we joined the locals in public settings, where they congregate. In the small villages, people visit the local cafés for cappuccinos and gossip. They may linger at their table for an hour or more. It is an informal setting where they talk to everyone who lends an ear, strangers included. If we were to pull out a sheet with questions on it, they would have clammed up or guardedly sterilized their answers. In Malta, everybody knows each other, and trust is minimal. We determined therefore, that it would be best to join in lackadaisical conversations. We listened and made mental notes. The conversations could be about anything but sooner or later would move onto discussing the COVID-19 experience. Few had suffered from it. Most knew someone who did. The locals were suspicious of the authorities' intent even when the authorities had the people's wellbeing at heart.

Refereed journal publications about health policy in Malta, especially during the pandemic, are rare and this may be one reason why a 2020 article by Sarah Cuschieri, Martin Balzan, Charmaine Gauci, Steve Aguis and Victor Grech stood out in our literature search. However, our experience differs from that paper. Cuschieri *et al.* mention the mandatory wearing of masks in Malta. We found it to be anything but mandatory, judging by what transpired in Gozo, one of the two main Maltese Islands. They mention quarantine, but in practice, it meant that those who were quarantined cannot leave their lodging between about 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM. The reason is that health inspectors are unlikely to show up and inconvenience themselves beyond their normal day hours. It is no mystery that Cuschieri *et al.* notice that 'another cluster of COVID-19 cases was established in early August 2020, originating mostly from Malta's nightclub-disco area of Paceville.' They should have added that Paceville comes to life when the inspectors have long finished their work for the day.

Cuschieri *et al.* (2020) write that

a number of public health measures were implemented at Malta International Airport including ... thermal temperature screening on arrival.

In reality, nothing could have been more haphazard and inconsistent. When a member of our research team arrived on an Alitalia flight at the airport in August 2020, there were four diminutive female nurses collecting forms that were earlier handed out to passengers on arriving planes. The nurses, standing huddled together in a corridor, were brushed aside by tourists coming in. There was no thermal temperature screening or security officials. In a later discussion with a photographer who had arrived on Ryanair, he said that there was nobody to take his form, and he walked from his plane to a cab outside the airport without anyone stopping him.

COVID-19 Policy

One of the co-authors of the *Cuschieri et al.* article is Charmaine Gauci. She is the Maltese Government's Superintendent of Public Health, the Anthony Fauci of Malta. Like Fauci, she became a household name overnight. When around mid-May 2020, the Prime Minister stated publicly that a second COVID-19 wave would not materialise, the Superintendent of Public Health did not contradict his bold statement that 'Waves are found in the sea, there's no need to strike up public fear of a second wave.' The Prime Minister said this despite the second wave having already been observed in other countries, killing more people than the first (Curmi, 2020).

Five months later, after the second wave had hit, Deputy Prime Minister Chris Fearne stated, with reference to Charmaine Gauci,

There has never been a situation so far, where public health said we should go in one direction and the people making decisions went in the other direction (Malta Independent, 2020).

In December 2020, Gauci was presented with the government's prestigious Republic Day Medal, at the behest of the Prime Minister, for leading the health sector during the pandemic (Zarb, 2020). After a victorious war, generals are awarded medals. In Malta, however, the war was not over. Within weeks of Gauci getting her

medal, the number of deaths exploded, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, warning Americans that Malta had hit Level 4 and that even fully vaccinated travelers to Malta were at risk of getting COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

When we visited Malta in the Summer of 2020, we noticed how Gauci refused to issue daily statistics for Gozo, claiming that the two islands, Gozo and Malta, were one country. This claim was analogous to arguing that apples and oranges are both fruit, and one should talk about fruit in general instead. While we were there, her office issued case statistics for Paceville, a town in Malta, almost daily, as if this were not part of the same country as well. In Gozo, the locals told us that they were being kept in the dark about what exactly was going on with the pandemic on their island. About one third of citizens bearing a Gozitan identification card live on the other island, Malta, for most of the year. When they showed up at health clinics in Malta as active cases, and displayed their Gozo ID card, they were automatically considered as active cases on the island of Gozo instead of Malta, in the weekly count. Without reliable statistics, it is hard to fathom what exactly is going on in Gozo.

On September 16, 2020, rumors were rife that 40 people from the village of Xaghra, Gozo, tested positive for COVID-19 that day. Forty positives in one day in one village would be quite drastic in a small island. The mayor of the village, deluged with inquiring phone calls, posted an evening note on his personal Facebook page that nobody from Xaghra had tested positive (Zammit, 2020). This is something that Gauci's office should have published daily, sparing third parties from chasing bureaucratic sources whenever rumors spiraled out of hand.

There were no mass gatherings or feasts in Gozo that triggered the pandemic's second peak. It was tourism that likely fueled the second wave in Gozo which lagged one week behind Malta. We were told that there were no contingency plans at the elderly homes in Gozo if they were to experience a sudden outbreak. It is estimated that about half of the bar and restaurant employees in Gozo are not officially registered with the government's labour office as employees. This allows retail owners to

underpay – well below the mandatory minimum wage – and avoid paying national insurance contributions. When an employee comes down with COVID-19, the establishment may remain open because the authorities lack access to information about where the patient may be working.

Another problem with government statistics in Malta is the exclusion of arriving illegal immigrants in the national statistics for COVID-19. Through a definitional tweak, they fail to be counted, and infection cases vanish into thin air as if by magic. A more accurate description of ‘tweaking’ may be ‘manipulating.’ Manipulation is what the Maltese government engaged in when it insisted, successfully, with other EU members that COVID-19 vaccine doses should be distributed evenly among all members on a per capita basis. Then, the Maltese government cut secret deals with the vaccine suppliers and as a result ended up with three times as many vaccines as other member countries, such as Bulgaria, on a per capita basis. Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz expressed outrage at how the Maltese had manipulated the international pharma ‘bazaar’ with their underhand agreements (Reuters Staff, 2021). However, Kurz failed to explain how Austria ended up with more vaccines per capita than several other EU countries. As a result of its outstanding access to the vaccines, and as of mid-May 2021, Malta started experiencing consecutive days without COVID-19 related deaths.

Discussion

Governments may claim to speak with authority as they tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet our experience in the Maltese Islands demonstrates that there is a tussle between a government that believes it has the right to guide the public, and the public itself with its passionate and untutored interests. A government may reform health policy in a democratic process by encouraging public feedback. Such feedback will shape the government’s humanitarian response as well, such as the need to re-evaluate policies about relatives being able to visit their dying loved ones at the hospitals. The third front for reform is the need for a socio-economic response in which the government consults the public about specific compensation schemes to counter business and labour setbacks in the face of the pandemic. Quite often, the Maltese government announces financial schemes without first consulting the same general public that, ironically, ends up funding such schemes through taxes.

The potential for containment can never be simple in Malta, one of the most densely populated countries in the world. In visiting the Maltese islands, and listening to the inhabitants, we saw first-hand the dichotomy between official statements and what transpires on the ground during a pandemic. Official statements may give a glowing account, but reality shows otherwise to investigative researchers who keep their ear to the ground. From listening to the public, to following the Maltese press, the evidence mounts that a constructive discussion is warranted in pandemic situations. Despite all this, in the end, a backroom deal between the Maltese government and the vaccine suppliers, at the expense of other EU countries, made the critical difference.

A basic rule of strategy is that one must conceal one’s plans from the opponent. That the Maltese treated their fellow EU partners as opponents may be surprising to health policy observers steeped in academia and ethical behaviour expectations. The art of politics, in the end, played the joker in what seemed otherwise to be a mediocre game against COVID-19. This may be the most important lesson from one small island that recognised its diminutive structure next to Goliath and punched above its weight with masterful strategy just when and where it mattered most.

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