

Speech by President of Malta George Vella on the occasion of Republic Day 2019

We shall shortly be witnessing the conferment of honours to Maltese nationals and to foreign friends of our country, for the service rendered in support of the Republic.

This event is traditionally held on the same day we commemorate the birth of our Republic.

On this 45th Anniversary of this auspicious event, it would have been in order to analyse together the paths and processes which led Malta to where it is today. It would have been timely to assess the different ways ahead, which our country could take up for its further advancement while navigating the troubled waters in our region, the European Union as well as internationally.

I, however, feel this is not what you expect me to address today.

Our country is going through very particular circumstances that deserve our full attention. Circumstances we need to examine without passion, without conceding to personal preferences, without prejudice, without political agendas, without shame to speak the truth and without obstinacy.

These are circumstances that shook Maltese society to its core. These are circumstances that shook our institutions from their foundations.

These are circumstances that stained Malta's name internationally.

These are circumstances that have a very negative effect on our credibility, our commercial activity, investment, tourism and the good name that Malta has always carried in international spheres.

I make these statements with a heavy heart and great sorrow for I never imagined I would ever utter these words about my country.

These past days were not pleasant for anyone. Whosoever has the Republic's interest at heart lived through these weeks with desolation, and even a degree of anger, towards the individuals who brought us to where we are today.

The events that unfolded have been unprecedented. A heavy shadow of doubt loomed over the functioning of our institutions and their impartiality.

Some may have interpreted my silence, as Head of State, as a weakness.

There were others who wanted me to speak, and say, more. Some assume that as President, apart from moral authority, I have powers to give orders as to what is to be done. Very few know how limited the powers of the President are. On the other hand, the President has many obligations and responsibilities. It is exactly these that I have exercised in the past few weeks, together with the moral authority given to me by the Office of President, in silence, utmost confidentiality and prudence.

I have kept myself informed of developments, minute by minute, and discussed facts and opinions with whoever is Constitutionally bound to keep me updated with events.

I have listened and assessed.

I gave the advice I thought best and took a step back from making public pronouncements. All along I was ready, were the right circumstances to develop, to intervene.

The decisions I took were based on information provided by those obliged to do so. I also consulted those whose professionalism, integrity and moral fibre I trust. I took my decisions with a serene conscience and within the restraints imposed on me by the Constitution.

During this period, I reflected profoundly on the Address I delivered on the occasion of my Inauguration as President on 4 April this year.

I had insisted, on that day, on the need for national unity. It was, already back then, an important message. These recent developments make my appeal even more relevant and urgent.

We need to stand united, as Maltese and Gozitans of goodwill, to get over the adversity that has overcome us.

Those who brought us to this juncture – whoever they are – were not working in the interest of the People of Malta. What happened cannot, ever, be justified. We need to be united in the hope that all those who have to shoulder the responsibility for their behavior, do exactly that, and pay the consequences. Whoever this may be.

The People of Malta expect justice to be done. Let us not, however, allow our feelings to develop into those of revenge and hatred.

Investigative and judicial authorities have to be allowed to do their work without interference, with serenity and with the due respect for their integrity, competence and independence.

My appeal goes first and foremost to the Maltese people.

Like you I am saddened, hurt and shocked.

With you I share the anxiety and uncertainty that I know to have taken over our exchanges in the family, at work, among friends. Do not let tempers rise and let us remain moderate in our behavior.

Let us remember that the Republic of Malta is far bigger than the gang of people who brought shame on our country.

Let us defend our country's name, especially with those who could use this turn of events to harm and belittle Malta's image abroad.

It is true that we have been severely damaged by all this. Yet, let us all Maltese who in their vast majority are honest, hard-working, capable, loyal and God-fearing people keep our heads held high. Let us continue on our journey, locally and internationally, to improve the conditions of work, the quality of life and above all strengthen the solidarity that has always united our People.

These are our real values, and the real picture of Malta.

We should not shy away from being united in admitting that the assassination of journalist Mrs Caruana Galizia was a horrendous act. Together we need to solemnly vow that all measures will be taken for anything similar never to happen again. On this occasion, we come together in voicing our profound regret at what has happened.

I call for the implementation of all legislative and security measures to safeguard the rights of the press and media in Malta. At the same time, I call upon journalists to be conscious of the critical responsibility they carry in modern society. I also call on the public in general to make better use of social media, which I am sorry to say, through disrespectful language and malicious messages, have turned it into an infinite source of hate.

My appeal also goes to Members of Parliament. Be reminded of your duty to guard the fundamental freedoms of the citizens who elected you, and to ensure that prosperity be fairly distributed. Yours too, is the duty to legislate for the strengthening of our institutions, for the judiciary's guaranteed independence and for them to work without any interference to be able to fulfil their duties with impartiality and justice.

Let us be jealous of the dignity and importance of our Parliamentary institution and the central role it should have in a living democracy. Let us be guardians in the defence of its rights and responsibilities.

I also plea, as I did in my April speech, for a more decorous tone and content in Parliamentary exchanges. Let us hold our discussions respectfully - on a reciprocal basis – and on well prepared content.

Let us give back to the House of Representatives all the respect it should command.

To those in charge of our institutions - I say that in a democratic society, it is none other than these same institutions that ensure rule of law and democracy, and that without them order and justice simply break down.

I do understand that reforms are necessary when these are due, both in the legislation that regulates these institutions, as well as in the laws and regulations which they implement. This however, does not mean that everything that was obtained in the past is now totally redundant.

The important thing is that those leading these institutions are not hampered in the execution of their duties, and that no leniencies or any other undue considerations prevail in the delivery of their duties.

This is why I am seeing to the wish expressed in various quarters on the need to establish what reforms are needed in our Constitution, and in what areas. This is being done while also paying heed to the recommendations made by the Venice Commission to implement, to the best possible extent and in line with our domestic circumstances, the proposals they put forward.

This is my appeal to the foreign media and international partners.

To just say we are sorry for what happened, is definitely not enough.

We will ensure that justice is done, and that it is seen to be done.

I thank all those countries that helped us with the investigations of the assassination of Mrs Daphne Caruana Galizia that were needed and are still ongoing. The whole of Malta should not be tarnished by these sad events. Malta is far bigger than any group of individuals involved in these events – whoever they may be. Our country's role in the creation of all that is good and beneficial to its people, both domestically and internationally should not be obscured by what has very regrettably happened.

Malta's reputation does not deserve to be dirtied and depreciated. Our country should continue carrying the respect it earned for the good it achieved along the years, for a history and culture that go back thousands of years, for the enormous contribution it has made to the attainment of peace in the world, and for its eminent history in defence of values, for the traditional generosity of the Maltese people and for the overwhelming potential of its human resources. These are the same resources that have found their solid foundations in education and which can be found in all the four corners of the globe, in the highest-ranking academic and administrative levels, carrying Malta's name with the high esteem it deserves.

This is the Malta we cherish. These are the values we represent.

Let me now turn again to my compatriots.

This is not an easy hour. However, we have to live through it.

Our duty is to ensure that this anguish leads to the discovery and outing of the whole truth. All those involved, high and low, have to carry the burden of their responsibility and pay their dues.

The people have a right to express themselves in all the freedom guaranteed to them by the Constitution. The more civil these manifestations are, the more effective they will be.

This is the moment when a democratic country and its people enjoy the benefits and safeguards that democracy itself provides. This democratic system will deliver us to a serene transition from this turmoil and back to normalcy. This is the only way ahead. One we cannot disagree upon. This is what should bring us together right now.

Together we need to mend what has been broken and reconstruct what has collapsed. We need to build our country anew.

Above all, we need to ascertain that our country's institutions are not threatened in their work and are given the strength and protection to serenely fulfil their duties.

I call on all on those who in one way or the other carry some form of political, institutional or Constitutional responsibilities to carefully weigh their actions, and act once they are sure to place the national interest before the personal one. The tool of moral authority is the use of persuasion. Regrettably this does not always yield results.

Our country has gone through several downturns throughout its history. Somehow we have managed to survive, and emerged strengthened and more determined. Our strength always rested in our unity.

This is what we should be doing now. Our nation beckons us to do just that.

We need not look too far to see how well we compare to others near and far.

Let us appreciate, and stand proud of, our good qualities as a nation. Let us strive for more unity and put aside what divides us. Let us build on the good we already have and on all that is positive.

Nothing is perfect.

We have, and will continue, to have differences.

Yet let us invest more energy to solve these problems instead of pointing fingers and leveling accusations against one another.

Together we need to sow the seed of respect, foster trust, value integrity and place our collective energies towards growth and its equitable allocation among us.

Let us help and trust one another.

I am convinced we will make it.

Let us pray to God, as we do in our National Anthem, to bestow unity on us Maltese and grant us the peace our country yearns for.

Viva Malta Repubblika.