

Gozo today: poorer, greener, and Roman Catholic as ever



James Debono

GOZITANS HOLD steadfast to their traditional Catholic values by resisting secular ideas like divorce and gay marriages, but change is in the air in other spheres of life with the environment emerging

as one of the major concerns of the Gozitan community.

Gozitans are financially worse off with an overwhelming majority of 75 per cent reporting a decline in purchasing power during the past year, according to a MaltaToday survey conducted in April.

The survey reveals that a lack of employment opportunities tops the list of concerns of Gozitan respondents. The bleak economic picture emerging from the survey is reflected in the declining fortunes of the party in government. Gozo is less of a Nationalist fortress,

with the Nationalist Party's advantage over the Malta Labour Party slipping from 18 per cent in the 2003 election to just 4.5 per cent, according to the MaltaToday survey. Disenchantment with the entire political system is also strong with

40.5 per cent saying that they are still undecided or determined not to vote in a forthcoming election. The state of the roads, environmental degradation and a decline in tourism emerge as the other major concerns of the Gozitan community. Gozitans are

less enticed by the trickling of jobs and wealth promised by property developers and are increasingly suspicious of mega-projects like golf courses. However, most Gozitans would favour a bridge linking the two islands as a remedy for Gozo's double isolation as an island within an island-state.

Gozo also emerges from the survey as a staunch bastion of Roman Catholic values with overwhelming majorities against the introduction of divorce and gay marriages.

Methodology
A total of 538 respondents were randomly chosen from the Gozo section of the directory with 314 accepting to be interviewed. Results were weighed according to the age and sex distribution of the population. The survey was held between 10 and 13 July.

jdebono@mediatoday.com.mt



An island's dilemma – bridging the sea gap

FACED WITH the problem of living in an island within a larger island, the majority of Gozitan respondents favour the construction of a bridge linking Gozo to Malta.

While 57.7 per cent would favour a bridge over the Gozo channel, a substantial minority of 42.3 per cent defend Gozo's identity as an island cut off from the mainland by sea.

Support for a bridge linking the two islands is strongest among younger respondents. Among those surveyed aged 18 to 24, support for a bridge linking the two islands rises to 66.7 per cent.

Yet in the absence of a bridge or an airport, the only links between the two islands remain the ferry service and the expensive helicopter service. Unsurprisingly only 5 per cent of Gozitans have used the helicopter during 2006.

The helicopter service has not alleviated the Gozitan problem of double insularity with 95 per cent claiming that they have never used this service.

On the other hand 84 per cent of Gozitans have used the ferry

service at least once during the first seven months of the year. The survey also shows that 16 per cent of Gozitans use the Gozo channel service more than once a week. The percentage of those using the ferry service more than once a week rises to 29 per cent among the 18-34 age bracket.

Gozitans are equally divided on whether an airport should be developed to link the two islands by air. Controversy on building an airstrip in Gozo has raged over the past decade. MLP leader Alfred Sant scrapped plans for the construction of an airstrip on agricultural land after becoming Prime Minister in 1996.

The present government had issued a call for interest for developing an air-link between the two islands, but so far nothing concrete has materialised. But while the MLP's document on environmental policy excludes the development of an airstrip in Gozo, its document on Gozo does not – Gozitan Labour MP Anton Refalo favours an airstrip, but his colleague, Gozitan MP Justyne Caruana, is against.

Going green – Gozo says no to golf and hunting

"WE DON'T want to live in a crib" – this was the typical reaction of Gozitans to Maltese environmentalists protesting against building development on the sister island during the construction boom of the 1990s.

However, after years of connivance with developers promising a trickle-down of jobs and wealth, Gozitans are increasingly suspicious of development projects like golf courses.

Environmental degradation emerges as one of the top three concerns of the Gozitan people. Most respondents choosing the environment as their main concern referred to rampant development in the countryside which is ruining Gozo's charm. 8.2 per cent also think that environmental degradation is the main problem facing Malta as a nation.

The MaltaToday survey also reveals that most Gozitans oppose the development of a golf course in the pristine Ta' Cenc area. While 44 per cent are opposed to the proposed golf course, 40 per cent support this development – an indication that the Greens are winning the battle for the hearts and minds of Gozitans on this controversial issue.

Developer Victor Borg is currently proposing the construction of 106 new villas and bungalows on the Ta' Cenc plateau before formally applying for a golf course.



Development of a golf course in Ta' Cenc (%)	
In favour	39.7
Against	44.1
Don't Know	16.2
A hunting ban in spring (%)	
In favour	43.7
Against	36.7
Don't Know	19.6

Gozo's reputation as a haven for hunters is also disproved by the survey. A majority of Gozitans

would favour the abolition of hunting in spring. While 44 per cent favour a hunting ban in Spring, only 37 per cent oppose it.

An indication that Gozo is becoming greener in its outlook comes from opinions expressed by respondents aged between 18 and 34 where an overwhelming majority of 56 per cent support a hunting ban in spring.

Opposition to a golf course in Ta' Cenc rises to a 50 per cent within this age bracket.

Yet problems faced by Gozo due to its double insularity – an island within a small island-state – poses limits to green thinking as most, especially younger people, favour a bridge linking the two islands. The impact of a bridge on Gozo's unique identity in terms of traffic and infrastructure would be devastating.

The surge in environmental awareness has not yet been translated into massive support for Alternativa Demokratika – the Green Party, which only manages to score 2.5 per cent in support from Gozo, far less than the 14 per cent who would not vote in a forthcoming election.

Yet AD's support among decided voters rises to a substantial 4.5 per cent, a substantial improvement from the 0.7 per cent gained by the Greens in the 2003 elections.

Giovanna Debono trusted by 54 per cent of Gozitans

page 1 AD chairperson Harry Vassallo manages to score a trust rating of 6 per cent in an island where his party barely managed 0.4 per cent in the last general elections. This could be a reflection of a greater environmental conscience among Gozitans, which had also seen the first Green councillor

being elected in Sannat in March. Despite the PN's declining fortunes, Minister Giovanna Debono is still trusted by 54 per cent of Gozitans. While the Gozitan minister is trusted by 90 per cent of Nationalist voters, her trust rating falls to 28 per cent among Labourites. Among those set not

to vote in a forthcoming election, Debono enjoys the least level of confidence at 27.8 per cent. On the other hand, among the undecided her trust rating rises to 63.1 per cent. This could be an indication that in Gozo those intending not to vote are the most disenchanted category of voters.

Gozo – voting intentions of decided voters (%)			
	July 2006	2003 Elections	Difference
PN	51.7	58.8	-7.1
MLP	44.1	40.8	+3.3
AD	4.1	0.4	+3.7
Trust Barometer in Gozo (%)			
Lawrence Gonzi	39.5		
Alfred Sant	25.7		
Harry Vassallo	6.1		
None	19.9		
Don't Know	8.8		
Approval rating for Minister Giovanna Debono (%) - percentage of each category of voters who say they trust Gozo Minister Giovanna Debono			
Nationalist Voters	90		
Labour Voters	28		
AD voters	60		
Undecided	63.1		
Not Voting	27.8		
Total	53.8		



Bleak outlook for Gozitans

THE ABSOLUTE majority of Gozitans are financially worse off this year. While 70.4 per cent of respondents in a MaltaToday survey have reported an erosion of purchasing power, only 3.2 per cent claim that they have more disposable income this year.

The survey reveals that lack of employment opportunities tops the list of concerns of Gozitan respondents regarding both Gozo and Malta as a whole.

The state of the roads, environmental degradation and the decline in tourism also emerge as the other major concerns of the Gozitan community.

In another indication that environmentalism has made deep inroads in Gozitan society, 8.2 per cent of Gozitans consider environmental degradation as their main national concern.

The survey also reveals a gap between political discourse and real Gozitan concerns. While the PN has been criticising Labour for refusing to back a parliamentary motion aimed at reuniting Gozo as a single district, only one respondent mentioned this issue as his main concern.

Income during the past year (%)	
More disposable income	3.2
Less disposable income	70.4
Same as before	26.4
Gozitans' top 10 concern on Gozo (%)	
Employment Opportunities	41.8
Roads	11
Environment	9.9
Tourism	9.2
Gozo Channel	5.8
Cost of Living	3.8
Health/Education Services	3.4
Public Transport	2.4
Parking	2.1
Corruption	1.7
Gozitans' top 10 concerns for the nation (%)	
Employment Opportunities	33
Cost of Living	16.4
Environment	8.3
Crime	7.6
Public Finances	7.2
Taxes/Utility Bills	5.8
Illegal Immigration	5.4
Roads	3.3
Corruption	3.3
Tourism	2.5

A bulwark of Christianity

BENEDICT XVI would feel very much at home in Gozo. Unscathed by the winds of moral relativism blowing across the European continent, Gozo emerges as a nation of churchgoers, where divorce and gay marriages are still considered as anathema.

With 84.5 per cent of respondents claiming to have attended mass on the previous Sunday, Gozo has more churchgoers than the whole of Malta.

A survey held by MaltaToday in April showed that 77 per cent of Maltese and Gozitan respondents had attended mass on the previous Sunday – far ahead of other European countries.

Poland comes a distant second with 56.7 per cent of the population going to mass on any given Sunday.

Gozo's 84.5 per cent figure contrasts with abysmal figures of church attendance in the rest of Europe. The number of French who say they attend church regularly has shrunk to a mere 7.7 per cent. In Italy, where nearly 90 per cent of Italians call themselves Catholic, less than 30 per cent say they go to mass regularly. And in Spain, only 14 per cent of young Spaniards attend church – a 50

per cent decline in less than four years.

Unlike young people in the rest of Malta, Gozitan youth defy the wave of secularisation which has emptied churches across the continent.

Attended Mass last Sunday (%)	
Yes	84.5
No	15.5
Divorce (%)	
Agree	18.7
Agree in some cases	7.3
Disagree	69.6
Don't Know	4.4
Gay Marriages (%)	
Agree	13.6
Disagree	80.4
Don't Know	6

Among those surveyed between the ages of 18 to 34 years, mass attendance in Gozo is as high as 84.8 per cent. In Malta as a

whole, within this age group mass attendance falls significantly to 58 per cent.

Massive rates of church attendance are also reflected in strong views against the introduction of gay marriages and divorce. Only 14 per cent of Gozitans agree with gay marriages. Yet the gay lobby has scored some inroads among younger respondents aged between 18-24 where support for gay marriages reaches the 27 per cent mark.

Only 26 per cent of respondents agree with divorce despite Malta being the only country in the world apart from the Philippines where divorce is not permitted. Support for divorce among younger Gozitans aged 18-34 is slightly higher at 33.8 per cent – an indication that even in conservative Gozo, secularisation is slowly eroding the clerical consensus.

However, overall Gozitans are more opposed to divorce than the rest of the Maltese. While 70 per cent of Gozitans oppose divorce, a survey carried out by TV programme Xarabank in 2005 shows that 54.6 per cent of the Maltese oppose divorce.

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