

# The Extending Horizons of Rural Malta : 1960-2010

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## **The Extending Horizons of Rural Malta: 1960-2010**

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There have been many changes in the village of Naxxar, as in all Maltese villages, since I first lived there with my family in 1961.<sup>1)</sup> These changes reflect general developments in Maltese society. With rising affluence, the built environment of the village has expanded around and beyond its old core. With this has come a subtle change in the quality of life. There are more material goods, but less interaction among the Naxxarin, the people of Naxxar. The local political structure and patterns of authority have shifted. Partly reflecting these developments, parish celebrations have also changed and acquired new meanings and functions. Malta's horizons have widened considerably during these five decades (Boissevain 1993; 2000, see also 2006: 169-200).

### **1. Malta**

Situated midway between Sicily and Tunisia, the Maltese archipelago is minute, covering only 315 square kilometres. Malta, the largest island, is twenty-seven kilometres long and just over fourteen wide. Its sister island Gozo is only fourteen by eight kilometres and Comino covers less than two square kilometres. With a population approaching 413,700, a population density of 1,313 per square kilometre and 1.3 million tourists visiting annually, Malta is probably the most heavily populated state in Europe. Its official languages are English and Malti, which is related to North African Arabic. The most important recorded event of Malta's history was the shipwreck of St. Paul off Malta in A.D. 60. He reputedly consecrated the Roman governor as the islands' first bishop. The Maltese are still intensely Roman Catholic. Other notable arrivals were Roger the Norman (1090), the Knights of St. John (1530), Napoleon in 1798 and Britain in 1800. Malta gained its independence from Britain in 1964.

### **2. Social space**

The parish church is very much the hub around which community life has revolved for centuries. Every village is a parish; some towns are divided into two or more parishes. As villages had no mayors, the parish priest was the informal head of the village. Villages as such owned no property but the parish did and its most important possession was the parish church. This building is more than a central place of worship. It is usually

located near the geographical centre of the village that has grown around it. Its gilded ceilings and silver altar fronts, embroidered vestments, damask tapestries, ornate statues and precious votive offerings represent the parish's collective history and wealth amassed over centuries via the savings, work and bequests of generations. The saint to whom the church is dedicated is the patron of the parish and the village. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the important associations, shops and residences traditionally were located in the *piazza* —the square in front of the church— or nearby in the streets leading in and out of it.

The residence pattern was thus concentric. It reflected the distribution of economic and political power. Those with the highest status tended to live near the church and those with the lowest farther away and in the little alleys backing on to open fields, or in rural hamlets. Residence in the village centre conferred prestige for, like elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the built-up village has been associated with the urban culture of the town, with 'civilization' (see also Silverman 1975). The periphery of the village, which shaded off into the fields, was associated with the country and agricultural work that in Malta, as in many other Mediterranean countries, had very low status because it was associated with poverty, physically punishing work, cultural and social deprivation and danger. Up to the 1960s the countryside was virtually uninhabited (Boissevain 2001).

Maltese villages in the 1960s were, therefore, inward looking, focussing on the parish church and the intense social, political, economic and ceremonial life that takes place in and around the central square. The religious processions that pass through the streets immediately adjacent to the central square link the secular space of the elite area of the village to the sacred space of the church. Religious processions do not pass through the poorest quarters, though the parish priest blesses all the village houses immediately after Easter.

### 3. Naxxar

Naxxar, the ancient hilltop village on which this study focuses, is in many respects a typical Maltese village (also see Catania and Scerri 2000). In 1961, when we first moved there, it had a population of 5,000. The parish included three hamlets: San Pawl tat-Targa, Maghtab and Bidnija. The social and residential structure of the village was concentric. The village's five most important streets led into the *piazza*. The bus stop, the police station, the residences of the parish priests, the notary, the chemist, four priests, the palazzo of the Marquis Scicluna, Scicluna's bank and four bars were all situated on the square or no more than a few minutes' walk away from it. Moreover, all the important voluntary associations were housed in or nearby the square. These included the Peace Band Club, the Victoria Social Club, several parish lay associations, the football club and the Malta Labour Party club. St. Lucy Street, which was the town's principal commercial street then, led from the *piazza*, the village's upscale residential area, past the chapel of St. Lucy to the chapel of San Gwann at the western edge of the parish, and the focal point of the village's poorest quarter. Most who lived there were semi- or unskilled industrial or government labourers. A few farmers also lived there and commuted to their



**Figure 1** Naxxar parish square circa 1975 (Source: Malta Department of Information).

farms in Magtab located in the plain four kilometres northwest of the village. They only returned to their village houses for weekends and feast days.

The Naxxar of 1961 was a more intimate community than it is today. Most residents then were either sons or daughters of the parish or had married into it. Only very few outsiders and virtually no foreigners lived there. The residential area was compact. Most shops were located in or near the *piazza* or along St. Lucy Street. There were many more small shops. The grocery shops were important meeting places for the women during the day. In the evening the women stayed at home while the men met in the bars and clubs or, in warm weather, on the church parvis. I regularly visited most of the bars and clubs to keep in touch with public opinion and to learn about local customs and history. As few foreigners visited Naxxar bars in those days, I was something of a curiosity, but I was soon made to feel welcome and included in the discussions.

There were many bars. The most prominent, and largest, was the Victoria Bar next to the notary's house in the square. This was the meeting place of the local 'Establishment'. The village's elite of priests, teachers, police and many others would congregate there most evenings. On several occasions I counted over forty patrons and up to five tables of card players.

Physically, socially and politically at the opposite end of the village, in the heart of the San Gwann neighbourhood, was the Kuka Bar. Though smaller, it was always crowded and patronized by manual workers and other Labour supporters. There were another five bars situated on or just off the *piazza*. Further down St. Lucy Street were two more small bars as well as three small general grocers, a green grocer and two butcher shops. There were also craftsmen along St. Lucy Street: a tailor, a barber, two carpenters, two blacksmiths, the village cobbler and, in San Gwann, two more blacksmiths.



**Figure 2** View down St. Lucy Street with women drawing water from a communal faucet. J. Boissevain, 1961.

#### 4. Changes

Naxxar has grown considerably since 1961 and in 2009 had some 13,600 residents. New residential areas have emerged, new traffic arteries have ripped open the town and the old village core has been partly abandoned by locals and then resettled by outsiders. Naxxar's location near two north-south traffic routes and Malta's increased car ownership has generated a massive increase in traffic. At times the bumper-to-bumper traffic inside the village hinders pedestrian movement considerably. In the week beginning December 8, 1997, around 7:30 am and later that day around 7:00 pm, I counted an average of 23 cars a minute passing slowly along Labour Avenue and the new 21st of September Avenue. The traffic effectively cuts into the social life of the village. It restricts movement and compartmentalizes sections of the town for extended periods each day.

Today all the old bars except the Kuka Bar and the OK Bar in the main square have disappeared, as have the grocery shops, the tailor, the barber, and two blacksmiths in St. Lucy Street, leaving only a butcher, one carpenter, the cobbler and one blacksmith. In or nearby *piazza*, as a sign of the present more affluent times, there are two new coffee shops, a pizzeria, a small coffee bar, a milliner, a jewellery shop, two newspaper and stationary shops, a part-time photo studio, and a little this-and-that gift shop. With an eye on the tourist trade, the Sicluna family has opened the Palazzo and its splendid formal gardens for tours and extraordinarily expensive lunches. The OK Bar and Peace Band Club, the Labour Party Club and Football Club now also serve traditional Maltese sandwiches at lunchtime. They were joined by the Nationalist Party Club after the 1987 elections.

The disappearance of many of the neighbourhood food shops along St. Lucy Street has meant a decrease in the number of places where neighbours, especially women, used to meet regularly to discuss local and national developments and comment on the activities of those not present. The disappearance of the tailor, the barber, one of the blacksmiths and the two bars from St. Lucy Street eliminated important meeting places for the men. St. Lucy Street men as well as those from the San Gwann area passing by on their way to the *piazza* would often stop by to greet the craftsman and others who had

also stopped by his shop. The shops of these craftsmen were convenient casual and neutral meeting places where men could stop and talk to each other while the proprietor continued working. In contrast to the popular political party and the band clubs, these shops were not openly partisan and men could stop there to talk and debate with others in a neutral atmosphere. Such informal and non-partisan meeting places were important social venues in a society such as Malta that is divided by fierce political and factional loyalties. With the disappearance of these informal discussion venues of the ever-present proprietor, the opportunities for casual socialising has been reduced, thus further isolating men who do not frequent partisan clubs.

The rhythm of village life has changed in yet other ways. On summer evenings the *piazza* is no longer crowded as it was in 1961. Then it used to be filled with men strolling, sitting and chatting on the parvis of the parish church. From there they could watch much of the social traffic that flowed across the square in and out of the bars, clubs and parish associations. Now many villagers live too far from the centre to be able to stroll to the square to meet friends. Not just the activities in the square have changed; the streets at the centre of the village are also less populated. There are no longer as many people walking through the streets or sitting in front of their houses on summer evenings to catch the cool air. This change can in part be explained by the move out of the village centre to the periphery.

Other developments have further reduced contact between Naxxarin. Several super markets have opened on the busy roads to Mosta and St. Paul's Bay that pass through or near the village. Frequented by outsiders as well as Naxxarin, the supermarkets, besides siphoning off customers from small local shops, increasingly draw in men who chauffeur their wives and help carry the shopping. Because outsiders and men frequent supermarkets and shopping has become less frequent but more substantial, daily shopping as a social activity of neighbourhood women has also been reduced. More comfortable houses, television sets, home DVDs and growing car ownership have provided access to information and entertainment that do not require contact with fellow Naxxarin. On top of that, increased affluence, vastly improved welfare, pensions, unemployment benefits, and health services have replaced some of the help that family and neighbours formerly gave each other. Since they need each other less, they have less to do with each other.

We also see a rapid decline in the number of children; one of our neighbours in 1961 had eighteen children and another one eleven, though five was nearer the average in 1960. Now, in 2011, 1.9 per family is the norm. Fewer children mean that today there are fewer family celebrations, hence fewer occasions for socialising with kinsmen and intimate friends. On the other hand, the celebrations of baptisms, first Holy Communions, confirmations, engagements and wedding celebrations have grown in scale (Boissevain 1988).

In short, in the past five decades the quality of life in Naxxar has changed. People no longer meet face-to-face as often as they once did. They spend more time at home embellishing their houses, watching television and playing computer games. They spend less time walking through the village. Because they travel more often by car rather than by bus or walking, they have less opportunity to meet face-to-face and to talk to fellow

villagers. In short, native villagers socialise less with each other. All Maltese villages now have many more outsiders. As a seventy-year-old friend in Kirkop remarked, 'Jer, we don't see each other so much. We don't know the names of the newcomers. The village is not the same' (Boissevain 2006: 175).

What are the consequences of these changes for personal relations? I would say that social networks have become larger and more extended. People now have many more links outside the village. Do larger networks and less frequent face-to-face contact with fellow villagers mean that people find it more difficult to stay in touch with personal relations? Not necessarily. Personal networks are still activated and serviced. For example, there may be less frequent face-to-face contact because there are fewer parties celebrating rites of passage, however, such celebrations are now much bigger, lavish and last longer. Each time they bring together many more of the kinsmen, patrons, clients and friends who make up those social networks.

There are also new ways of staying in touch with personal relations, namely by means of electronic visits. The level of communication by telephone, mobile phone, text message, and email in Malta is quite astounding. Does electronic communication affect the quality of the networks? I would think so. Contact by mobile or email is not the same as meeting face-to-face. Electronic communication may make it easier to stay in touch with distant links in a network, but it is qualitatively different; it is less personal. This is an area that deserves serious research.<sup>2)</sup>

The social and physical distance between residents has grown. The village is bigger and more extended. There are many more strangers, both Maltese and foreign. There are fewer meeting places and people are less dependent on each other. Family relationships, however, are still very close and married children regularly visit and many telephone their parents several times a day.

## **5. Shifting residential patterns**

Growing affluence, government housing schemes, and favourable mortgage arrangements have enabled many Naxxarin to build modern houses on the outskirts. Numerous families have moved out of the old village centre. As shops along St. Lucy street closed and super markets and larger commercial outlets opened along 21st of September Avenue, commercial activity shifted away from the village core. As people have moved out of the town's centre into what was once the periphery, the character of the village has changed. In 1961, the high status residential area centred on the town's huge church and central *piazza*. Now some of the new residential developments to the northwest and south of the old core have also acquired high status (Boissevain 1986).

Beginning in the late 1970s, as locals moved out of their often uncomfortable traditional houses into new villas, outsiders moved in. Foreigners were the first to appreciate the lines and construction of these ancient 'houses of character'. Though often damp and gloomy, most were built around a flag stoned central courtyard filled with pots of flowers and citrus trees onto which most of the house's windows opened. With their patterned floor tiles, wooden beams, arched ceilings, carved balustrades, interior wells

and surprising features, they symbolized the Mediterranean to the expatriate pensioners and tax refugees who began to settle in Malta. Equipped with modern plumbing, some form of heating and, increasingly, air conditioning, these houses became comfortable as well as charming. As local interest in vernacular culture developed in the 1980s, young economically comfortable Maltese couples from outside the village also began to seek out such houses. Because of Naxxar's central location, its traditional houses were particularly sought after. By the 1990s these Naxxar houses were highly valued and in short supply. Now, local young couples can no longer afford houses in the village core.

Ironically, parts of St. Lucy Street and San Gwann and their humble alleys on which the better-off Naxxarin had looked down, have become some of the most sought after addresses for the Island's young elite.<sup>3)</sup>

The orientation of residential space in Malta has thus changed quite radically. The village periphery —once socially marginal— and beyond that, the open country —once stigmatized— have become sought-after residential areas. A ring of villas and housing estates has encapsulated the old village core that is now being gentrified by elite outsiders. The open country no longer threatens since it is slowly being populated by wealthy Maltese and foreigners, and hence no longer associated with poverty. The few full time farmers are regarded benignly as living folklore. Consequently, the countryside is being opened up and the village's periphery is no longer an area of transition between



**Figure 3** Traditional 'house of character' and festa street decorations (St. Lucy Street).  
J. Boissevain, September 1989.



**Figure 4** New houses built along the periphery. J. Boissevain, 1998.

a dangerous, uncouth area and the high status urban centre of the village. These changes have affected both the style and the location of residences as well as the rhythm of village life.

## **6. Local political changes**

The political structure of Naxxar has also changed since the 1960s when there was no local government in Malta. Power and authority were effectively in the hands of the police and the Archpriest. The latter, in turn, relied on the assistance of seven local priests and a number of influential laymen and women, and the leaders of Catholic Action, the Legion of Mary, MUSEUM, the Young Christian Workers and the committee of the Peace Band club. The police concentrated on preserving law and order, while the Archpriest and the coterie surrounding him were primarily concerned with maintaining hegemony over parish affairs and the celebration of its rituals.

This traditional setup has changed radically. Malta is now independent and parliamentary representation returned long ago. Local Members of Parliament and the patrons and brokers linked to the Malta Labour Party, the Nationalist Party and their respective clubs now represent the interests of Naxxar's residents to government. This in turn has reduced the Archpriest's former role as an intermediary between parishioner and government. The church's influence has been further reduced by the dwindling number of local priests, the decline in the activity and membership of the parish's lay associations, and a gradual secularization. Moreover, in 1976, the Labour government ended the right of parish priests to use the police to limit the rowdy enthusiasm of feasts celebrating parish patron saints. Parish priests have thus lost much of their former control over an important political arena.

The most striking change in the local political scene was the introduction in 1994 of local government. Naxxar residents now have their own elected mayor and local

council.<sup>4)</sup> Since its establishment, this body, composed of both old and new residents, has been active in promoting the interests of Naxxar as a community of residents. Naxxar is now more than simply a parish; it has become a municipality with a legal status. The Local Council has provided some of the town's public spaces with gardens, plants, new pavements and lighting. It established a free bus service between the town's centre and its more remote neighbourhoods, and introduced a three-day spring community festival in May. Together with the Museum Department, it developed a restoration programme for the village's many neglected monuments, some of which are prehistoric. Since coming into being the local council has given expression to and stimulated concern for Naxxar's identity and heritage.

## 7. Festive developments

Interesting changes have taken place in Naxxar's parochial celebrations during the decades since 1961 (Boissevain 1984; 1992). The Good Friday procession has grown. In 1999 it involved 200 more participants than in 1961. These even included 27 women and girls, some 80 biblical figures whose new costumes were patterned on those in the Bavarian Oberammergau Passion play, a regilded catafalque, a new statue of Judas and ten more masked penitents dragging heavy chains tied to their ankles. The entire procession had grown to 600 persons and lasted four-and-a-half hours. The expansion of the Easter Sunday procession was even more impressive. In 1961 it was a simple affair that consisted of a priest, a few altar boys, some musicians and several youths carrying the statue of the Risen Christ; seventeen in all. There were almost no spectators. In 1999 167 persons took part, many in the costumes worn during the Good Friday procession and the Peace band accompanied it. The church square was crowded with spectators.

The celebrations of the annual festa of Naxxar's patron saint, Our Lady of Victories, on September 8 have also grown. The number of band marches increased from eight in 1961 to fifteen by 1987. The spectacular coloured ground firework displays now take place on five days preceding the feast instead of only on the eve, as in 1961. The Victoria Club in St. Lucy Street has acquired its own brass band and now sponsors the wild parade on the morning of the feast. In all, Naxxar now celebrates its festa for seven days instead of three. This growth in scale is largely concerned the fireworks, band marches and wild demonstrations of loyalty to the parish patron saint. These are events that take place outside the church. The liturgical events of the annual festa and of Holy Week have largely remained the same. They are still well attended by a devout public. Why have the playful and theatrical aspects of these public celebrations grown so?

Many factors have contributed to the growth of the more playful dimensions of Naxxar's popular celebrations. First, and perhaps foremost, has been the continuation, if not increase, of parochialism. The standing of a community has traditionally been judged by its religious fervour; as measured by the lavishness of its public ritual celebrations such as Holy Week and the festa of its patron saint. Rising affluence, the end of emigration, and the increased emancipation of women have assured organizers of more finances, more helping hands, and more participants. The increasing democratization of



**Figure 5** Statue of Christ with cross leaving the church during the Good Friday procession in Naxxar. J. Boissevain, 1998.

popular culture under the Labour government (1971-1987) also played a role. It promoted popular song festivals, folklore displays, and televised local festivals and Holy Week celebrations.

The rising standard of living and the increasing involvement of the state in providing a safety net for its citizens has meant that people have become less dependant upon each other. With independence has come isolation. Increasingly people seek out community celebrations to soften, for short moments, the alienation that has accompanied increased affluence and independence.

The rapid increase in tourism also stimulated the increase in popular celebrations. A large audience of tourists and visitors from other villages publicly demonstrates the success of a celebration. Tourist interest triggers patriotism and promotes local identity as celebrants become aware that they are showing Maltese culture to strangers. The numbers of tourist buses parked at a festa have become markers in parochial competition. Tourists, however, normally only attend the main public celebrations on the eve and the day of feast. They do not generally attend the band marches, firework displays, and the wild demonstrations of loyalty to the patron saint that take place during the days before and immediately after the main celebration on the day of the feast. These in fact are precisely the events that have increased since 1961. They are the occasions when Naxxarin celebrate amongst themselves. This joyful partying promotes a sense of communal identity and feeling of togetherness. Increasingly outsiders are coming to live in the village while locals are marrying and moving elsewhere. The festa draws the community's sons and daughters back to celebrate, reuniting families, neighbours and the community. Celebrating together reinforces and creates solidarity.

Naxxar parish celebrations have acquired new meanings and are performing new tasks. They help recapture a sense of community for people who have lost contact with each other, who have become less dependent on their neighbours, and who were once



**Figure 6** Statue of Naxxar's patrones carrying Our Lady of Victories in the festa procession. J. Boissevain, 1997.

part of a more closely knit community but have moved elsewhere. They are also the means of displaying local and Maltese culture to visitors from abroad. Celebrating together helps to ease, albeit temporarily, the fierce political tension between neighbours that regularly increases in the run-up to the national elections (1993: 97-119; 149-154).

## **8. Discussion**

The rhythm of village life compared to 1961 has changed. There are no longer as many people passing through the streets in the town centre or sitting in front of their houses on summer evenings to catch the cool air as there used to be. This change can partly be explained by the move out of the centre to the periphery. There are fewer locals living in the village centre than twenty years ago. Moreover, the foreigners and wealthy urban Maltese who now occupy many of the traditional houses in the centre are not accustomed to spending their evenings on their doorsteps chatting to passers by or saying the rosary together.

There are also other reasons why the centre of Naxxar in the evening is more deserted than when we first lived there. Now every home has television. The average Maltese has access not only to Maltese programmes, but also to a range of foreign channels. Television at home, in short, also keeps men off the streets and out of the clubs

and bars where in the 1960s and 1970s they were required to go to in order to watch television.

Another factor that has contributed to the change in the rhythm of the village is the tremendous increase in private transport. Virtually every family in the village now owns at least one car. People are thus able to leave the village whenever they wish. They are no longer tied to the bus from the main square. This enables them not only to leave when they wish, but they can also return later, for the last bus of the day arrives back in the village at half past ten in the evening. With their own transport they are discovering and exploring areas of the countryside that they had never seen before because they were remote from the bus routes and Maltese are not fond of walking. Thanks to their private transport they can remain by the seaside until after midnight to escape the stifling summer heat that builds up in the village. Many Naxxarin have bought seaside houses or apartments in or near St. Paul's Bay. This also draws them away from the village on summer evenings and weekends.

## 9. Conclusion

To sum up, during the past fifty odd years, Naxxar has become larger and more complex and its population more diverse. Unquestionably, increased local mobility, access to foreign television, internet sites, and the growing influx of tourists and foreign residents together with their own occasional travel abroad on business and pleasure has widened the horizons of the residents of Naxxar.

Though they may now have less face-to-face contact with each other and depend less on one another than when they were less well off, the native born Naxxarin still form a unity with a keen sense of local identity. The church-centred parish organizations, while less all-embracing than in the 1960s, operate together with the new town council to unite old and new residents of the village. The identity of the town is celebrated with ever more enthusiasm during Holy Week, the annual festa and the Local Council's new spring feast. As the complexity and pace of life increases, and the social distance between residents grows, these celebrations become more important in creating a sense of social belonging and anchorage.

The developments in Naxxar largely parallel those in the rural English village of Chipping Campden that Yuko Shioji describes in this volume (Shioji N.D.). These include the influx of affluent urbanites into settled rural villages creating a growing category of outsiders and insiders; the interest of these outsiders in acquiring picturesque traditional houses; the way this gentrifies the heart of the village and drives up the price of this type of housing to the detriment of young locals; and the way the interest of newcomers and tourists in the village history and buildings generates an appreciation of some locals in their own heritage. The growing tension between insiders and outsiders that Shioji describes in Chipping Campden is not (yet?) overtly present in Naxxar, however, it is present in certain Maltese villages inundated with tourists or saddled with social housing arrangements for poor urbanites and asocial families (Boissevain 1996; 2006: 174-177). In general there is mounting tension in Malta between local right wing



**Figure 7** Friends resting on the Naxxar church parvis. J. Boissevain, 1961.



**Figure 8** Youths celebrating during the triumphal morning march in the Naxxar festa. J. Boissevain, 1989.

interest groups and the growing presence of African asylum seekers.

It would indeed be interesting to make a more systematic comparison between contemporary social developments in Western Europe and Japan.

## Notes

- 1) I first lived in Malta with my family from 1956-58 while working there for CARE, Inc. We returned in July 1960 to conduct research for my PhD and lived first in Kirkop and then in Naxxar until October 1961. Since then we have returned to Malta almost annually for holidays and occasional short periods of teaching and research. In 1981, we acquired an old town house in St. Lucy Street, Naxxar, where we lived for much of the time after I retired in 1993. We moved back to Amsterdam in 2001.
- 2) See Boissevain and Gatt 2011. Turkle (2011: 15) has already begun to examine the effect electronic communication has on the quality of social relations. Among other things, she found that some of her informants who intensely email and text 'readily admit that they would rather

- leave a voicemail or send an e-mail than talk face-to-face', and also prefer to avoid the 'real time' commitment of a phone call.
- 3) In 1961 Inga, my wife, invited the wife of the village notary to come for coffee with her. At the time we were living in a small house in an alley off St. Lucy Street, less than a five minute walk from the *pjazza*. The notary's wife, who lived in a large house on the *pjazza*, declined. With a sweet smile she said, 'Oh, but we never go down there'.
  - 4) Although foreign residents in Malta are permitted to vote in local elections, none so far have sought to be elected in Naxxar.

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