

## Hundreds cheer at first changing of the guard ceremony in 39 years

Kurt Bugeja Coster



Clapping and whistles of appreciation followed the first changing of the guard ceremony in 39 years in St George's Square, Valletta, yesterday.  
Photo: Jeremy Wannacott, DOI

The sound of applause reverberated across St George's Square, Valletta, as the Armed Forces of Malta's band yesterday heralded the first changing of the guard ceremony in 39 years.

Hundreds of locals and tourists gathered silently around the square's perimeter, making way for the marching soldiers with minimal persuasion as the guard was escorted to the Presidential Palace.

With badges catching the sunshine, the outgoing and incoming guards of 12 stood opposite each other as the sergeant leading the former handed the keys to the Palace to his counterpart.

The ceremony dates back to the rule of the Order of St John, when the Grand Master's personal guard was stationed in the buildings surrounding what was then known as Piazza De La Guardia.

When the island joined the British Empire, the square became known as the Main Guard, a parade ground that also housed a garrison to guard the island's British governor.

“Today, the changing of the guard is different to what it was back then. It is now a symbolic and ceremonial function,” AFM Commander Brigadier Martin Xuereb said.

Tourism Parliamentary Secretary Mario de Marco said this was not being done for protective reasons because times had changed, but as a ceremony.

He also took the opportunity to commend the work of the AFM as the two soldiers who had been on guard were replaced on sentry by another two.

“Soldiers carry out their duties, varying from rescues to protection, with passion,” Dr de Marco said, as a sergeant’s clear, crisp order cracked in the background.

Guards will now be standing sentry outside the palace doors on weekdays during working hours. The ceremony will be held at least twice a month, with the next event being marked on Friday.

Participating soldiers will be handpicked from all regiments and will spend a month standing sentry before returning to their routine duties for two months.

