

Italian Mayor on the Front Line

Judith Harris (January 16, 2016)



In a case described here as "dynamite," Rosa Capuozzo, mayor of Quarto near Napoli elected on the M5S ticket, received threats from local organized crime bosses, but failed to inform police. As a result, Beppe Grillo has expelled her from his M5S party and demands her resignation. Mayor Capuozzo refuses to quit.

ROME -- Italy's mayors, women as well as men, are on the front line these days, under siege as heroes in some cities, as villains in others, and on occasion, as both. At the moment the top of the pops (or unpops, depending upon the point of view) is Rosa Capuozzo, the attractive woman who is the mayor of Quarto, a town of almost 40,000 in the Campania northwest of Naples. Near the famous volcanic Campi Flegrei, Quarto was described by the ancient Roman historian Suetonius.

Capuozzo admits to having received serious threats from local organized crime lords, about which she failed to inform police. "If I did not tell them, it was so as not to destabilize the township," she has



explained. The back story: on March 27, 2013, Italy's Council of Ministers dissolved the previous Quarto administration on grounds of Mafia infiltration under the then mayor Massimo Carandente Giarrusso. New elections held in 2015 brought Capuozzo into office elected on the list of Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S).

News reports say that the threats, by the way, arrived to her via a fellow M5S town councilman. Now Grillo, backed by his alter ego Gianroberto Casaleggio, has kicked the hapless mayor out of his movement for immorality and ordered Capuozzo and her fellow M5S councilmen to resign on grounds of "grave violation" of his movement's principles. "We are not just any old Partito Democratico," said Grillo.

Capuozzo, however, stubbornly refuses to resign: "I am going forward," she said Tuesday, looking tense and close to exhaustion after three hours of questioning by Neapolitan magistrate Henry John Woodcock. Speaking to the press, Woodcock gave the rather starchy explanation for her interrogation, and the police search of her home and office, was that, "Although Capuozzo does not seem herself under investigation, since she appears to be the person offended as the victim of attempted extortion, her conduct has been less than linear and is to be examined."

This is the situation the Italian press describes as "dynamite." Capuozzo's fellow M5S councilmen and women, themselves expecting to be expelled similarly by Grillo, are defending her and protest that Grillo & Co. did not bother to come down to Quarto to examine for themselves their difficult situation. "The Movement has abandoned us, lambs thrown to the wolves," said M5S councilwoman Concetta Aprile. The investigation seems to extend from attempts to make illegal building contract deals and to throw votes of the organized crime band which controls Naples, the Camorra, to selected city candidates, including those of M5S.

The Partito Democratico (PD) could hardly be indifferent, including to Grillo's insults, and Premier Matteo Renzi made a point of saying that the M5S has no monopoly on morals and also called for her to resign. To this Grillo responded in his blog with publication of a list of 83 PD officials he says have been put under investigation during the past year throughout Italy.

Indeed, one leaked police phone tap has Mario Ferro, former town councilman from the PD, speaking with a building contractor with a sullied reputation. Ferro calls Capuozzo a "half idiot -- Does she think her granpa gave her that office? I'm the guy at Quarto who can solve your problems, I am in charge in Quarto, I have businessmen, lots of people from the past with a lot of political experience." Capuozzo reportedly was not playing ball with Ferro over what police believe was at least one of the problems at stake: construction of a soccer stadium by private business with, it is assumed, associated generous contracts to friends, rather than, as originally planned, with public funding and hence greater public scrutiny.

One of those who agrees with the demands for Capuozzo to resign is Giulia Sarti, a member of the Anti-Mafia Commission who heard testimony by Capuozzo, but also elected to Parliament by of the M5S. "In talking with her, we realized that she had held back information, so how could we know what else she might be holding back? This is Quarto, a township already dissolved for Mafia infiltration.... If we held back we risked measures against us for protecting a public official." On the other hand many in the rank and file of Grillo's movement are angry at his expulsion of Capuozzo, which they consider arbitrary. "Maybe it was a weakness on her part not to mention that she had been threatened, but dump her this way is wrong," said a fellow mayor, Federico Pizzarotti, head of the Parma city administration.

What may be a last word in Capuozzo's defense came in a phone tap from the son of a Camorra boss. "Now the toy is broken. We should have voted for someone else." Indeed.

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