

Fighting against the Sack of Rome

Judith Harris (December 07, 2014)



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The investigation began quietly four years ago, and gradually revealed surprising links among Roman neo-Fascist punishment squadristi, the narcotics-fattened 'Ndrangeta of Calabria, and white-collar bureaucrats and politicians in the capital. Investigators – they include the Carabinieri, anti-Mafia specialists, the tax police of the Guardia di Finanza, bank controllers of money laundering and secret services – believe that a clique of clever former neo-Fascists have for years manipulated campaign donations to local Roman politicians in exchange for lucrative contracts for everything from catering to construction and care for immigrants and Roma (Gypsies). According to wire taps, such contracts resulted in a 100% return on investments. “They were really sharp businessmen,” one investigator acknowledged.

The mastermind of the network is allegedly Massimo Carminati, a former neo-Fascist terrorist with the Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari (NAR), who was convicted in 1998 to ten years in prison as part of the notorious gangster clan Banda della Magliana, involved in drug trafficking and murder. He was sentenced to another four years of prison in 2005 for breaking into a bank vault in Rome. Somehow emerging from all this, he created a do-good organization of former prisoners who were given low-paying jobs like cleaning bike paths and collecting rubbish. The “Cooperativa 29 Giugno” allowed Carminati to ingratiate himself with local bureaucrats and politicians. Only weeks ago the head of prison services for the Lazio Region called the co-op “very good, very important.”

Carminati’s arrest Dec. 2 came as a shock to those working in the co-op. “I earn 950 euros a month,” said a woman who was an ex-prisoner and was working as a street-sweeper. “Now what am I to do?” Italian Premier Matteo Renzi was asking something of the same question. “I’m stunned,” he said on hearing news reports that members of his own PD were involved along with right-wingers. “All we’re missing are Jack the Ripper and the Loch Ness monster. We have to assume that everyone is innocent until proven otherwise, but I confess I’m really shocked.”

Political corruption has increased notably in the past decade, with the result that Italy ranks 69th down on this year’s Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International. Ranked cleaner in the newly released list are, among others, Namibia, Rwanda, Botswana and Malaysia with Portugal, at 31st down, twice as honest as Italy. Even more devastating was the European Commission study released last February, which singled out Italy as the most corrupt country in Europe, at a cost of about 4% of Italy’s GNP.

It is no secret that, in early postwar years, the United States helped to fund the Christian Democratic party, seen as a bulwark against the Italian Communist party (PCI), which regularly won a quarter of the vote. The PCI in turn, albeit fairly independent from Moscow, was similarly subsidized by the Soviet Union with gold ingots brought into Italy by boat. With the advent of the Center-left governments in the Sixties, the Socialist party (PSI) became a coalition partner but was not subsidized by outside forces. To fight back (and this is no particular secret), it received kickbacks from certain government agencies.

At the same time, those parties had activists throughout the country, who organized rallies and grass roots contributions that served, moreover, as a control over excess spending. Today, however, the end of ideologies including Soviet-style Marxism as well as the Italian Catholic church’s control over a portion of a once docile electorate, has decimated the grass roots parties. The surge in kickbacks in a swap for public contracts is also the result of a sea change in election tactics, such as the need for more sophisticated PR efforts and to pay for public opinion polls to bolster a candidacy, plus new laws meant for simplification, but which have resulted in an unintended hike in political party centralization.

Here is the result, in the words of Raffaele Cantone, president of the Italian Anti-corruption authority,



speaking to Nino Amadore of the financial daily Il Sole 24 Ore: "From this Roman investigation we see a political class that is completely subordinate to the crime lobbies. The novelty in this investigation lies in its having hypothesized corruption as a prevailing fact with Mafia association... Intimidation and physical threats are an indispensable component." ("We'll crack his skull with a brick bat," was heard on one phone tap.)

Il Sole 24 Ore of Dec. 7 lists names, titles and amounts of money and gifts (a Rolex) to individuals. A former aide to former Mayor Francesco Rutelli received a regular monthly stipend of \$1,250 plus a one-off payment of \$12,500. The network financed campaigns for both rival candidates for mayor last year, with rightist Nuova Italia of former mayor Gianni Alemanno reportedly receiving \$40,000 while the campaign managers of Ignazio Marino, his opponent from the left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD), received only \$35,000 or so (but won nevertheless). Marino, by the way, a doctor born in Genoa, has been pilloried in the press for having failed to pay a series of parking tickets; he normally rides around town on a bicycle but police have only now warned him that his life is in danger, and must travel with a bodyguard.

One of the more disgusting ways the network sought to raise funds was to seek building contracts for housing for immigrants. In one Roman suburb the deal proposed was to sell to the town, for an inflated amount, properties the mob already owned; install the immigrants into these remodeled apartments; and then collect the money the state provides. Luckily at least this project was rejected because the suburb was already housing 800 immigrants, and the local politicians feared a reaction if they opened their doors to more.

Rome is not the sole source of corruption, of course. Milan is working hard to recover from the scandals over construction contracts for Expo of 2015 while Venice has suffered from the kickbacks to top politicians for construction of its Mose water barrier.

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