

WOMEN MAYORS FOR MORAL IMPERATIVE

They had profitable professions and knew nothing about politics. These four women have had the courage to surround the Government in Italy to fight against corruption and the Mafia, but above all to defend the common good of the towns in which they grew up.

The office is a constant coming and going of people. On a shelf, one of the many commemorative plaques reads a sentence by Giambattista Vico: "The hope and the courage of a few to leave indelible traces." The woman comes and goes continuously, without ever losing her cool and listening to everyone. Outside, their male companions for the last year and a half wait patiently.

We are in Rosarno, a town with nearly 16,000 inhabitants in the Piana di Gioia Tauro, Calabria, Italy. The woman's name Elisabetta Tripodi: 44, lawyer, mother of two teenagers and, since late 2010, the village mayor.

The first time anyone had heard of Rosarno outside Italy was in January 2010 when several hundred African migrants employed in the citrus crop and exasperated by their working conditions flooded the road through the village setting some of the main streets on fire. In response a hunt for blacks began with armed patrols that lasted two days and two nights. The event would be remembered as the revolt of Rosarno.

In Italy, however, Rosarno and Piana di Gioia Tauro associated for years with the 'Ndrangheta, now recognized as the most powerful Italian criminal organization and the first global Mafia thanks to its ability to reproduce its structure abroad, establish relationships with outsiders, and maintain a strong home base. Calabria is where the 'Ndrangheta has its origin and is strong.

Eight months into his term, one summer morning, Tripodi received a threatening letter at her office by a prisoner serving a life sentence who belonged to a mafia family in Rosarno.

"He expressed disappointment over some decisions made by my administration, specifically, for bringing a civil action in mafia proceedings (still ongoing today) against the organised crime syndicate of Rosarno and evicting his mother from a house. An illegal building acquired in 2003 by the Town Hall where previous administrations had not evicted," says Tripodi.

Subsequent investigation found other letters to Tripodi in the man's cell. He has been sentenced to five years.

When in the summer of 2010 a group of friends suggested that Tripodi run for mayor at first she said no. The previous administration had been dissolved by the mafia; the situation was tense after the revolt. She, who still works as a secretary in a village community in the area, has no political experience. In Rosarno, the uncontrolled urbanization has not been provided with services and there are neighbourhoods without sewers and street

lighting. The clans of the 'Ndrangheta (the family structure is the specific nature of this Mafia with respect to the other Italian mafia) control drug trafficking and weapons through the nearby port of Gioia Tauro, and reinvest in services, construction, in the waste cycle, wherever there are large economic interests, or corruptible or bribable entrepreneurs and corrupt politicians in Italy and abroad. In Calabria there is 40% youth unemployment and nearly 30% of irregular work. Young people are leaving. In Rosarno, since 2003, no administration has managed to complete their term; Tripodi aims to break that trend.

"IN 1998 WHEN I RETURNED to Calabria having lived for 15 years in Lombardía (I wanted my children to grow up here) I saw that things had been allowed to get much worse. Then I realized that if I had made that decision, I had to do something for my country. So in the end I agreed to present my candidacy."

Thus, with a leftist coalition, Tripodi takes the reins of her community, trying to do what is expected of any public administration: move within the law, putting the collective interests to the individual. She awards contracts for public works, collects taxes, opposes property speculation, finances a sports-centre (the village did not have one), reforms school and creates Tendopoli (complex organized for living in tents) for immigrant workers, "although Rosarno is still unable to receive them with dignity." She tries to rationalize expenditure. She has reduced her income as mayor by 50%, leaving the other half for social policies.

If during the election campaign the political opposition called her "secretary", diminishing her professional role, now they (and not just the opposition) criticize her for working, "an accusation that has never been made to a male mayor," she says. They call her the mayor of the Africans; she is accused of lying about the threats.

"There are too many people in silence perhaps afraid to express themselves freely, but who identify with what I'm doing," she says, remembering a man who a few days after receiving the intimidating letter presented himself to the Town Hall asking to shake her hand.

ABOUT 70 MILES EAST of Rosarno in Monasterace, in 2006, another woman had taken the mayorship of the community animated by a feeling similar to Tripodi. Maria Carmela Lanzetta, 57, pharmacist, mother of two twenty-something children, defines it as "the moral duty of commitment." We are in the same province of Reggio Calabria, in the area of Locride. As in Rosarno, here there once stood a major magno-greek city (there Medma; here Kaulon) and there is also a port next to it. Like the Piana di Gioia Tauro, Locride hosts an old and strong 'Ndrangheta, which made its fortune in the town of Monasterace during the sixties and seventies with trafficking contraband cigarettes.

Just like Tripodi, Lanzetta studied and lived several years in Northern Italy and is a left-wing woman with no previous political experience. "I came back because I thought it was necessary that

the young Calabrian could find work here, bringing with them the positive experiences they had lived elsewhere."

Since returning she has worked in the family pharmacy that her mother has run in town since 1954 and participates and promotes social and cultural activities.

Monasterace lacks financial and human resources. In Italy, the spending review cuts (Decree 95 July 2012) of the Monti Government will fall by 50% in the municipalities in 2013. No sooner installed in the Administration, Lanzetta began a desperate search for public funding "for anything they could bring to the people." For her, to respect the rules, the urban order and direct development toward the recovery of what exists are very important. From day one she has waived her entire income as mayor.

Despite the political struggles and internal clashes, "partly because we don't always know how to mediate" in May 2011 Lanzetta started her second term. On the night of June 26, 2011, some unknowns devastated and burnt her pharmacy, which supports her family (including her mother).

"It was terrible not only because it is all we have, but, above all, because of the personal commitment our pharmacy has always given to the town and its most humble people." Investigations on the reasons for the destruction of the pharmacy are ongoing. The next morning, with the help of the community, Lanzetta and her family reopened the pharmacy in a building next door and life returned to its normal pace.

On March 27, 2012, at eleven o'clock at night, four rifle shots were fired at her car. She didn't realize until the next morning when while driving to the Town Hall she dropped her mobile phone. That evening there was a council meeting to discuss the problem of 60 women working in the chrysanthemum greenhouses for a private company that operates on communal lands: 8 hours a day for 29 Euros a day that has not been paid (even today) since 2010. Lanzetta still went to the board. "The problem of these women had to emerge. Do you know what it means to be a woman, mother, who lives in the country and earns a wage? It means freedom, awareness of your value and, consequently, to learn not to bow your head."

The following morning she returned to the Town Hall and resigned. "I felt I was no longer free to act as mayor, and without freedom is not possible."

The whole country is mobilized in support for Lanzetta. "In the end I realized that my resignation would give the state a negative sign, and because of the respect I have for it in the end I decided to continue." She moves continuously while talking. Her voice is quiet, she looks tired. "In these seven years I have aged a lot, I look like someone else."

FOR SEVEN MONTHS, Lanzetta has lived with an escort. As in the case of Tripodi, that means going out accompanied by two policemen in the car in which no one else can travel. When she's at home a vehicle with two policemen watches from the street. For both, the

hardest thing to give up were the small daily activities: for Tripodi not taking her child to school, for Lanzetta not going to the supermarket, for a walk along the beach, having a coffee with a friend. "I don't want to use the service given to me by the State for anything that is not related to my work as mayor. I have stopped doing everything else," said Lanzetta.

Both feel that one can get used to the escort just thinking it will not last forever and that through it they can continue to carry out what another mayoress of Calabria, Carolina Girasole, defined as "demonstrating in such difficult areas that the state is present and is more efficient and effective than other types of organizations."

Girasole, 49, biologist, qualified in Rome, mother of two teenage daughters, has been mayoress of Isola di Capo Rizzuto since early 2008, a town of 16,000 inhabitants in another hot area of Calabria, Crotona. The 'Ndrangheta came to this area of sea in the fifties and sixties when they began to build big resorts. "Here, the 'Ndrangheta had the great ability to quickly understand that economics and politics go hand in hand," explains Enzo Ciconte, Calabrian writer, considered one of the foremost experts in Italy on the dynamics of mafia associations. "So they did two things: first, protection, offering protection to the hotels, and the other entering the Town Council of Isola". This council was dissolved in 2003 due to "mafia infiltration" and until 2008 it was administered almost continuously by "extraordinary fees". Just as in the case of Tripodi, Girasole's first reaction when a newly created left-wing civic list proposed she run was a resounding no. Co-owner of a medical laboratory in a nearby town, Girasole also has no political experience. But, like the others, felt the need to "break the dynamic by which it appears that what is around you does not belong."

If at first she imagined combining her laboratory work with the new administrative responsibilities, within the first few days of the term the latter absorbed her completely. "We found a body heavily indebted and completely disorganized. There were many open procedures and errors of employees who had fallen on the area's development."

THE ADMINISTRATION LAUNCHES internal reorganization, with changes of duties between employees, to break clienteles and the creation of the legal department. Civil action is brought in mafia cases. Work to restore the community properties confiscated from the Mafia that were abandoned and confiscated land, but that were actually occupied by the former owners. She got funding to rehabilitate the former (work has just started), while the 80 hectares of agricultural land is about to become a cooperative created through public announcement and thanks to the synergy of the Town Hall, the prefecture, farmers associations and Libera, association against the mafia. In these areas, schools have made a butterfly park and designed a house of music that the Town Hall is creating. "The fact that children can use these lands, and even create projects there allows us to talk to them about it."

She no longer has time to devote to the laboratory, which suffered economic losses. Eventually, she decided to sell.

She has written death threats on the walls of the town. Several cars and the Town Hall entrance have been burnt. "Many people who probably had interests that have been suspended are no longer at mine or my husband's side. Many others have difficulty openly siding with me because they will probably be attacked for it," she explains with that realization and determination that she communicates at all times. Francesco, Girasole's husband sells building materials and has lost customers. "Defamation and loneliness are the price to pay for justice," he says. "I think what my mother is doing is underestimated," says Federica, 18.

The State has offered Girasole an escort. She turned it down. "An escort prevents you from moving in places where you find the citizens: supermarkets, church, at the hairdresser, wherever, even in the most unexpected moments you can explain the reasons for some decisions. Furthermore, it makes no sense that I am escorted and the rest of my family is exposed." Girasole does not hide the fact that she is afraid for her life and that of their families.

THE 'NDRANGHETA is not only a problem in Calabria. "Whoever carries out this idea it is because they want to cover a local reality," says Ciconte, who published the first book devoted exclusively to the history of the 'Ndrangheta. In Barcelona, Madrid, Algeciras, Malaga, just to name a few cities, the presence of several groups (also called 'ndrine) has been confirmed and ringleaders have been arrested.

Also, the 'Ndrangheta is not present in all Calabria. In Reventino in the province of Catanzaro, Decollatura village is historically one of those happy islands. It is a mountain village: 3,300 inhabitants, a subsistent and rural economy where small businesses dominate. Since 2011, the mayoress is Anna Maria Cardamone, 49, economist, qualified in Messina (Sicily). She has given up a position as managing director of a regional foundation dedicated to the promotion of rural development to fulfil the promise made to a group of young people (mostly central-leftwing women without political experience) who wanted to return "participatory" democracy to the people.

"I told them, 'I'll give you five years, but you'll have to be the leaders to win the next election," she says. In her office at the Town Hall, she is wearing coat and stops occasionally to cough. Despite the snow covering the village streets the building has no heating. "We had to choose: the school or the Town Hall," she says. Cardamone has found itself with a debt to the state and suppliers of over a million Euros that it is trying to clear without having to raise taxes. Her current strategy is to sell unused property, such as old rural schools.

Her first action was to remove the tender from the private waste management company (which cost the council almost 200,000 Euros a year) and started doing it directly as the Town Hall. It now spends less than half, and with the money saved has been able to hire (available only part-time) 12 people who have spent about 15 years precariously working for the Town Hall and also buy a machine for separate collection.

DESPITE THE DIFFERENCE in context, she also, like the previous three cases, is an uncomfortable woman. "As a woman, I had to represent the new, a time of transition from one situation, in order to then return to the same as before. In politics, still considered masculine, it is believed that women may be more conditional or hysterical and that they will leave sooner" believes Tripodi.

They have all received or receive anonymous letters advising them to leave office, threats to reveal "what they did", whether an alleged betrayal of their husbands, a crime or fraud. Slander and intimidation have also moved to the Web, where profiles and Facebook groups or anonymous blogs repeat the tone of the letters (also addressed to their families), and the manifests that at some time their towns have. Not only are they thieves or liars, but if they are there "it is because they have been complacent with someone." In its absence, they are criticized for how they dress or their appearance. All of them, as in Italy they have certain media attention, are accused of passing undeservedly as anti-Mafia heroines or defenders of justice, to give a bad image of the town and use it for their own careers.

The four often talk to each other and support each other. They have no intention of resigning, although some of them, like Lanzetta admits thinking about it every day. The people who voted for them put their trust in them and they do not intend to betray that. They have started long-term projects that they fear would be cancelled immediately if they left. Girasole is campaigning for next February. They all stress the importance of fighting the mafia mentality that Tripodi defined as "vandalizing everything that is common and yet wanting nobody to touch what is yours." The way forward, they say, is via strengthening work in schools, respect for the law and the courage to say no.

THE WOMEN IN CALABRIA historically have a fundamental role in the family. And that's where the 'Ndrangheta is built and maintained. Ciconte suggests: "We will only win over the 'Ndrangheta when we can convince women to break up their criminal families." Is it possible that some also fear that these mayoresses can be a role model for other women? Ciconte thinks so. None of them think that theirs is an act of heroism and they all insist that their intention to assume the mayorship was not in order to fight anyone. None of them prioritises coming across as nice, they all want to do the best they can. And they all feel that, if people try to intimidate them, it is because they are on the right path.

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