

A Fatal Car Bombing in Malta

I moved to Malta six years ago but have been a regular visitor for fifteen years. In that time I have come to know and love the Maltese people. Those I encounter everyday are unfailingly helpful and polite. This is by and large a safe country where people do not lock doors or cars. Last week's car bomb has forced me to reconsider my benign opinion. Now I feel dark echoes of Belfast during the troubles where personal and political opponents often met a violent end.

I am shocked and horrified by the murder of the fearless journalist, Daphne Caruana Galizia, as are the majority of Maltese; candle light vigils have been held and journalists have taken to the streets to protest this attack on free speech. I never met her but I know people who counted her as a friend. Thousands read her blog and newspaper columns containing stark exposés of corruption and malfeasance. Her assassination by car bomb casts a dark shadow over liberty and freedom here on the 'Rock' with worrying echoes for the whole of Europe.

No one can yet say who killed her; she made many enemies over the years. I did not find Joseph Muscat's (PM) statements inspiring. He vowed to hunt down her killers, but failed to offer the necessary support to journalists who are feeling vulnerable and afraid. Friends here say that with her death died the last hope in the fight for truth.

The car bomb that killed Daphne Galizia was not a lone event; there have been a number of similar incidents in recent years and none would appear to have been political. Gangsters have always feuded or killed those who attempt to frustrate their will. Reports suggest that the police either don't act or frustrate justice by reminding those who complain of the risks they run if they persist.

I doubt if politicians are to blame despite Ms Galizia's allegations of their complicity in the offshore Panama accounts scandal and other illegal activities. I think the act was too blatant. To suggest that the ruling party is involved when Malta has just had a general election makes no sense, why silence a critic after the event? One explanation harks back to *Murder in the Cathedral* and the aside uttered by the king in anger, 'Who will rid me of this turbulent priest'. In a land where favours are handsomely rewarded, this could be a plausible scenario.

I suspect the criminal underworld in Malta either carried out the assassination or commissioned it. It has become more powerful recently, especially since the boom in the online gaming industry and the scope for money laundering that it affords. Corrupt developers have profited from bending the planning rules enabling extraordinary profits to be made by some. The island has enjoyed a spectacular property boom in recent years. New blocks of flats grow like toadstools defacing the waterfront and are now appearing inland to pollute the skyline. Currently, there is a debate about the future of Manoel Island that sits in the middle of Marsamxett, the second great Maltese harbour. There is a campaign to keep this small island green and out of the hands of

developers. It is the last substantial green space in the conurbation and would give the people a much-needed park. But, I bet the developers will win – they usually do.

Malta appears to be culturally a European country but there are reasons why it is not; the language is 60% Arabic and the people must have about the same mixture in their blood; it is a meld of cultures, part Naples part Cairo. This means that they are hospitable and friendly but wily traders, who bargain as of habit.

Like Sicilians, the Maltese are strongly Roman Catholic. Each village has a church big enough to be a cathedral in any other country. The power of the Church is waning and society becoming more liberal on social matters but family ties and loyalty are still strong. They protect each other and feuds are not uncommon. It seems that, like Sicilians, they can commit murder one day and take communion the next.

The island hosts rich Libyans fleeing from the chaos in their country but close enough to return to conduct business both legitimate and nefarious. Malta has a history of close links with its neighbour since the time of Dom Mintoff (Malta PM and autocrat from 1971-84) and his chum Col. Gaddafi. Who can say how some of these people make their money?

Whilst recalling that the Maltese Mafia ran Soho in the 1950s until eased out by the Kray twins, it is well to remember that the Italian mafia also has a strong presence on the island and for them the planting of car bombs is a way of death.

The central problem is one common to all small societies. A few families dominate the commerce of the island, its legal profession and indeed politics. Everyone pretty much knows everyone else or if they don't they have a cousin who does. Cash corruption happens on a large scale but petty corruption derives from swapping favours, 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours'. It is hard to refuse the petition of a friend, relation or political backer. This feeling for family and friends, while in essence laudable, can easily become corrupted to the point where people lose sight of the greater societal good. It fosters an unhealthy way of conducting business and in turn engenders an inherently corrupt society.

A curious feature of the investigation is that the FBI, rather than Scotland Yard or French Sûreté has been asked to assist. A Dutch forensic team is also on hand. Only an external agency can be trusted to carry out an investigation to get to the root of the corruption and organised crime that is undermining the Maltese body politic.

Few people would trust a purely Maltese investigation – As Ms Galizia's son Matthew pointed out;

‘One of the police sergeants who is supposed to be investigating her murder, Ramon Mifsud, posted on Facebook, “Everyone gets what they deserve, cow dung! Feeling happy :)”.’

The government is conscious of the reputational damage this killing has caused. They have offered a reward of €1million to

anyone who can come forward with information that leads to a conviction. The children of the murdered woman refuse to endorse this reward on the grounds that finding the killer alone will not atone for her murder. They want to see their mother's courage honoured by a fundamental change in Maltese society and in particular Maltese political and judicial probity.

I suspect that the clue to this outrageous act may well not lie in what Daphne Caruana Galizia had written but what she was planning to write. Her final words in her final blog are chilling;

‘There are crooks everywhere you look now. The situation is desperate’.

Did she have a presentiment of what was to come?

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