

DAPHNE CARUANA GALIZIA

‘HER MOST SENSATIONAL
CASE FORCED A SNAP ELECTION’

ON 16 OCTOBER 2017, Daphne Caruana Galizia was killed by a powerful car bomb minutes after leaving her home. Caruana Galizia was Malta’s best-known and most widely read journalist – and also its most divisive. Her investigations routinely set the national agenda. Her most sensational case – alleging links between the prime minister’s wife, a Panama shell company and suspicious transactions from the Azerbaijani regime – forced a snap election four months before her assassination.

To her critics, Caruana Galizia was a ‘hate blogger’ and a ‘poison-pen writer’ – the ‘witch of Bidnija’. The vitriol was, in part, the result of ferocious tribalism within Malta’s bipartisan political system. The journalist starkly opposed the Labour Party, which had swept into government in 2013. The other part had to do with her style, which juxtaposed investigative reporting with fiercely opinionated commentary, salacious titbits and intensely personal attacks on her political opponents. Once, her house was set on fire while her family was asleep inside, and Caruana Galizia faced constant threats. At the time of her death, she was the subject of 43 libel cases – many brought by government officials.

So, even as the country was reeling from the news of her murder, some openly welcomed it. In the aftermath of her death, Caruana Galizia’s opponents directed their anger at her family for linking the murder to a weakening in Malta’s rule of law. One theory even held that the family had orchestrated her killing – ostensibly, according to some, to destabilize the government.

‘We were given no time to grieve,’ said Matthew Caruana Galizia, the eldest of her three sons and part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning team of journalists behind the Panama Papers investigation. He is now also a leading figure in an intensified rule-of-law campaign. ‘There was one day, for literally 12 hours, when we just sat at home talking to each other. That was 17 October. And during that time, the government was going on the offensive against us and against my mother. That’s when we realized we couldn’t let things be, or there would definitely be no justice.’

Justice has become a watchword since then. Three men have been arrested and charged with executing the murder. They’re pleading innocent and have yet to face trial. Meanwhile, the suspected masterminds remain at large.

A Council of Europe report raises ‘serious concerns’ over the investigation and the rule of law in Malta. Caruana Galizia’s family and civil-society groups have called for an independent inquiry, but the government has resisted, insisting it would affect ongoing investigations. Vigils are held on the 16th of every month in the capital city, Valetta, but the authorities routinely remove the flowers and candles left at a makeshift memorial.



A vigil for Daphne Caruana Galizia,
September 2018

Justice, so far, remains elusive. Matthew says two types of justice are needed: ‘Justice for my mother’s murder – and justice for her investigations. We can’t have one without the other.’

Malta has witnessed a recent surge in gang-type violence, and Caruana Galizia’s murder was one in a string of car bombings since 2016. Most of those attacks targeted organized-crime figures, and were associated with drug trafficking and the lucrative, large-scale smuggling of diesel from Libya to Malta and Italy. This trade emerged after the Libyan revolution of 2011.

Caruana Galizia had written about this underworld, sometimes naming traffickers and highlighting the links that made up their networks. However, it was never the main focus of her investigations, and her family dismisses suggestions that she had been working on such a probe before her murder.

Her interest was far broader. As she saw it, Malta had been captured by criminal interests and was morphing into a mafia state where organized crime was allowed to take root with impunity and the complicity of the highest level of government. Matthew explains: ‘Whereas in Sicily organized crime is a phenomenon that exists in opposition to the state, in Malta it is part of the state itself. It is horizontally and vertically integrated across the state and business.’

The nexus between politics, business and crime had long been a significant focus for Caruana Galizia, but the release of the Panama Papers investigation in 2016 increased the stakes. Cabinet minister Konrad Mizzi, then responsible for energy, was named in the investigation – as was Keith Schembri, the prime minister’s

chief of staff. True to style, Caruana Galizia drip-fed the findings in provocative posts ahead of the full release.

The story she was investigating is complex and still unfolding. What is now known is that companies owned by Mizzi and Schembri in Panama planned to receive payments of \$2 million from a company in Dubai. This company, 17 Black, is owned by the Maltese director of a new €450 million gas power station, which was a key pledge in the government’s 2013 electoral campaign. 17 Black had received payments from the local agent for the liquefied natural gas (LNG) tanker fuelling the power station, as well as an Azerbaijani security guard. Socar, the Azerbaijani state-owned energy company, supplies the power station. All the parties involved deny any wrongdoing.

Meanwhile, a separate money-laundering inquiry is investigating payments which, according to Malta’s financial intelligence unit, may have been kickbacks from the country’s citizenship-by-investment, or ‘golden passport’ scheme.

‘What we’re really speaking about is an organized-criminal group. These are not people acting independently or randomly,’ says Matthew. ‘The government is an entity embedded within that group.’

In the months before her assassination, Caruana Galizia published a further, incendiary series of reports. She claimed that the prime minister’s wife, Michelle Muscat,

‘AS SHE SAW IT, MALTA HAD BEEN CAPTURED BY CRIMINAL INTERESTS’

owned a Panama company and had received a €1 million payment from the daughter of Azerbaijan’s president. Prime Minister Joseph Muscat called it the biggest lie in Malta’s political history. To stave off a political crisis, he called an election and an inquiry, and pledged to resign if a shred of truth was found. The election returned him to power and the inquiry, concluded after Caruana Galizia’s death, failed to find evidence to support the allegation.

Caruana Galizia’s murder has deepened the polarization in Maltese society, and framed the political debate more sharply around the rule of law. This has given rise to new civil-society groups, with names such as Occupy Justice and Repubblika (Republic). Through public pressure and court action, these groups seek justice for her murder, and scrutiny of Malta’s institutional failings.

A Council of Europe report published in May 2019 concludes that ‘Malta’s rule of law was severely undermined by a weak system of checks and balances’. It highlights concerns over the murder investigation, noting that key players ‘seem to enjoy impunity, under the personal protection of Prime Minister Muscat’. It describes the anti-corruption body as ‘utterly ineffective’ and notes that the police force is not perceived to be ‘politically neutral in the service of the state’.



The remnants of Daphne Caruana’s vehicle after
the car bomb that killed her

It is not yet known who killed Caruana Galizia, and how the murder may be linked to her reporting. To her family and campaigners, there is no question that whether or not the government had any connection to the murder, it facilitated an environment that made the murder possible.

‘In protecting people we know to be criminals, the prime minister created an atmosphere where serious organized crime is permissible,’ Matthew says. ‘Because he prevented any judicial action against these people, the only stone in their shoe was my mother.’

Since this piece was written, one of Malta’s leading businessmen, Yorgen Fenech, 39, was arrested in dramatic fashion on 20 November 2019, intercepted by the country’s Armed Forces at sea as he allegedly attempted to flee the country on board his private luxury yacht. Fenech, and an offshore company he owns, 17 Black, were key targets of Caruana Galizia’s investigation. She alleged the company was connected to Maltese politicians at the highest level. In the wake of Fenech’s arrest, the then Chief of Staff of the Maltese Prime Minister Keith Schembri was alleged to have intervened to pass on messages to Fenech coaching him on what to tell investigators. Fenech later himself alleged that Schembri had provided him with insider information during the investigation. The prime minister, Joseph Muscat, came under intense political pressure for his handling of the case in the wake of the arrest. Despite knowing of Schembri’s intimate friendship with Fenech, Muscat allowed Schembri to be present during sensitive briefings by the police and the Malta Security Services even after Fenech became the suspected mastermind. Muscat stepped down as prime minister on 12 January 2019. At the time of publication, Schembri had not been charged with any crime, months after being arrested and questioned over his suspected obstruction of justice. ●