

Rome Mayor Virginia Raggi of the Five Star Movement engulfed in corruption scandal

By Marianne Arens
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Rarely has a party been so thoroughly exposed as Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) in Rome. The election of its member Virginia Raggi as mayor of the Italian capital in summer 2016 was regarded as their greatest success to date. Now Raggi, who had promised a "radical new beginning in the name of honesty and transparency", is engulfed in a corruption scandal.

On December 16, Raffaele Marra, head of personnel of the Rome City Council, was arrested for corruption. A few days prior, Paola Muraro, responsible for waste disposal as part of the environment brief, resigned because she was being investigated by the state attorney for abuse of office. Earlier, in September, Raggi had to completely reshuffle her cabinet when five leading members of the city government resigned in protest.

Several building contractors have been placed under house arrest, accused of bribing members of the city administration in relation to a school renovation programme. They are suspected of pocketing up to 20 percent of the budget for the renovation as bribes.

Also on December 16, police seized documents belonging to the mayor to examine her hiring practices.

Grillo, the founder and leader of the Five Star Movement, has kept an iron grip on Raggi. On his blog, he wrote on December 17: "Mistakes have been made. Virginia has recognised that she had trusted the wrong people. From today, the line of approach has been changed ... We will fight tooth and nail to change Rome."

On January 2, Grillo proposed an amendment of the M5S code of ethics, to be voted on via the internet, which would stipulate that a minister from M5S does not automatically have to resign if the judiciary is investigating him or her. This alone is decided by the "guarantor of the movement", namely Grillo himself. In the Italian press, the change has been nicknamed "decreto salva-Raggi" (Raggi Rescue Decree).

The fight against corruption has long been a central issue in the propaganda of M5S. Grillo has exploited accusations of corruption in order to channel the widespread anger with

the ruling elites behind his own movement, which claims to be neither left-wing nor right-wing. In reality, however, the M5S advocates a right-wing, nationalist and pro-capitalist programme. The Five Star Movement has risen to become the second largest party in the country, just behind the ruling Democrats (PD), and won the runoff ballot for Rome mayor with 67 percent of the vote.

Raggi has only needed six months to expose the real character of Grillo's movement. It represents the interests of petty-bourgeois layers who want to climb the social ladder and enrich themselves, and is linked very closely with the old, corrupt elites. Its tirades against government waste are directed primarily against workers in the public sector, and its demands for stricter immigration controls are aimed at the most vulnerable sections of the working class.

M5S has increasingly gathered right-wing and far-right elements around itself. This is also shown by the recent exposures of the Rome city administration. Raggi enjoys the best relationships with well-known and very right-wing circles in Rome. The 38-year-old lawyer had worked at the law firm of Pieremilio Sammarco, whose brother, the star lawyer Alessandro Sammarco, has defended both ex-premier Silvio Berlusconi, as well as his advisers Marcello Dell'Utri and Cesare Previti.

It is reported that Raggi completed an internship 13 years ago at Cesare Previti's firm. Previti had helped Berlusconi obtain his villa in Arcore and was co-founder and later parliamentary leader of his Forza Italia party. He was defence minister in Berlusconi's first cabinet in 1994. The long-time adviser and Berlusconi lawyer, a member of the scandal-ridden P2 Lodge, was later convicted for bribing judges (but was only imprisoned for one day).

The Sammarco law firm enjoyed good relations with a predecessor of Raggi, the extreme right-wing mayor Gianni Alemanno (2008-2013). In his era, the so-called "Mafia Capitale" flourished unhindered. The accusations against Marra and Paola Murara go back to the Alemanno era.

Marra, who is also known as "Rasputin from the Capital" because of his influence over Raggi, last worked as the

senior employer of 23,000 municipal workers. Under Alemanno, he was chief of the housing policy department, and in this capacity, was embroiled in several cases of real estate corruption.

Arrested at the same time as Marra, Rome real estate mogul Sergio Scarpellini was said to have helped Marra acquire a private property in 2013 for half a million euros below the market price. In return, Marra is said to have granted him lucrative contracts.

Marra is also said to have concluded contracts worth millions with another contractor, the engineer Fabrizio Amore, who is also being investigated in connection with the “Mafia Capitale.”

City councilor Murora, who was supposed to clean out the nepotism in the department responsible for refuse (AMA), was also part of the insider network. For 12 years, also under Alemanno, she worked as a highly-paid consultant for the AMA, and in this capacity was able to pocket over a million euros in fees. Murara is under investigation for environmental crimes related to the garbage disposal service.

Since 2012, the extent of the “Mafia Capitale” has been uncovered by investigative journalist Lirio Abbate, the newspaper *L'Espresso* and the Attorney General Giuseppe Pignatone. According to him, known Mafiosi such as Massimo Carminati and Salvatore Buzzi controlled whole sections of the city administration. Carminati came from the neo-fascist terrorist organization Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari (Revolutionary Armed Cells) and his business entertained the best relations with both political camps.

Under Alemanno, Carminati and Buzzi led a so-called “cooperative” holding, with up to a thousand employees and a turnover of tens of millions of euros, which they used to put former prisoners or immigrants to work. They also managed to take over the management of reception centres for refugees. Here, they pocketed the €30 to €45 a day paid for each refugee by the Italian state—a business worth millions that proved more profitable than drug dealing. Carminati and Buzzi are now in custody.

After Marra’s arrest, and after intensive discussions with Grillo, Raggi severed ties with two other close associates in December: Deputy Mayor Daniele Frongia and the Secretariat Director Salvatore Romeo. As the *Espresso* has revealed, Raggi has long been known by Marra, Frongia and Romeo. The quartet had forced the top candidate of the Five Star Movement in Rome, Marcello De Vito, out of the race for city government in early 2016 through intrigue.

Raggi’s election victory in June 2016 was mainly due to the fact that she was “a new, fresh face”, while the two large political camps were completely discredited. “Mafia Capitale” had blossomed under the Alemanno regime, but it

also subsequently brought the centre-left camp no improvements.

When Ignazio Marino took over the leadership of the capital in 2013, with the support of the Democrats (PD) and various pseudo left organizations, the city faced bankruptcy and Marino pushed the crisis onto the working class with an austerity decree. He quickly lost all support and resigned voluntarily at the end of 2015, although the corruption allegations raised against Marino proved to be unfounded.

Raggi brought Marra, Frongia and Romeo into the municipal administration as a conspiratorial clique, where they occupied highly-paid positions. The so-called “magic circle” (alluding to Raggi’s name “raggio magico”, magical radius) first came to public notice when the cabinet chief, Judge Carla Raineri, resigned in early September in protest against Marra, who apparently pulled all the strings. On the same day, the councillor responsible for financial affairs and three other senior officials left the city administration.

A January 3 survey by the Winpoll agency showed the Five Star Movement had lost two percentage points in the polls as a result of the revelations. If parliamentary elections were held now, Beppe Grillo’s party would still receive 26.4 percent. However, the winners would be a new coalition of the right-wing, with 34.4 percent (14.1 percent for Lega Nord, 13.2 Forza Italia, 4.4 Fratelli d’Italia), while Matteo Renzi’s Democratic Party would win 27.5 percent and the pseudo-left less than 5 percent (Sinistra Italiana 4.4 and Rifondazione Comunista 0.5).

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