

The Bengali migrant shopkeepers who took on the Sicilian mafia — and won

One April afternoon in Palermo in 2016, Yusupha Susso, a young Gambian migrant, was walking with two friends after one of them had got a haircut in Ballarò market. The cobbled back-streets form one of the multicultural hearts of Sicily's provincial capital, but also a place where organised crime settled years ago.

While Susso was walking down the road, Emanuele Rubino, a local criminal with ties to Sicily's mafia, insulted them. Rubino told the young migrants to get out of his way.

'This is my street' he told them. Susso was shocked, although not altogether worried. He carried on walking.

After all, he thought, he had two friends with him. What could Rubino do?

He'd soon find out. Shortly after, Rubino came back to the market—but this time he brought help and a gun.

After seeing Susso and his friends, a chase ensued through historic Palermo. Susso lost his friends, running for his life, as Rubino caught up with him. What happened next was captured on CCTV: images from the camera show Rubino with a gun in one hand approaching Susso before firing several shots.

Astonishingly, the bullet hit Susso in the head — grazing his brain, but not damaging it. However, he was left in a coma.

When I spoke to Susso later that summer, he was hiding in Milan. Back in Palermo, Susso was known for his singing abilities as well as his work as a cultural mediator in the city helping young migrants like him make Palermo their home. But the shooting had left him afraid. He is now unable to sing.

After the attempted murder, Palermo's migrant shopkeepers did something unusual for a city known for its decades-old mafia history. They mobilised against mafia demands to pay protection money. Bengali shopkeepers emerged as leaders in this act of rebellion. And with the help of local anti-mafia activists, they took on the power of mafia-linked criminals through the courts.

With the support of local anti-mafia group Addiopizzo, 11 migrant shopkeepers 10 Bengalis and a Tunisian went to the Palermo police together. In the past there had been individual cases of people going to the police to report the mafia. What was unusual about the shopkeepers was their decision to go to the police together as a group. Addiopizzo lawyer Salvo Caradonna, who helped the Bengalis take their case to court, said that the "real innovation... was that they wanted to press charges together."

Addiopizzo was founded by university graduates in 2004. *Pizzo* is Italian for 'extortion,' which refers to the tactic used by the Sicilian mafia to force businesses to pay cash in

return for ‘protection.’ The organisation's very name means ‘goodbye protection.’ Edoardo Zaffuto of the group said their mission was to rid the mafia scourge from Sicily.

After Rubino was taken into custody, the Palermo police arrested 13 mafioso in the summer of 2016. The court case dragged on for nearly three years. Ever since then, I have followed this story closely. Every few months I would get a Whatsapp message from members of Addiopizzo saying ‘court judgment will be announced.’ But it never came. The case dragged on and on.

Then in April 2019, a judge in Palermo reached a historic verdict sentencing a group of nine criminals to prison for mafia-like tactics and racial discrimination against the 11 migrant shopkeepers. Last November, the court of appeal in Palermo upheld a 12-year sentence against Rubino for the shooting of Susso. During the case the shopkeepers’ identities were protected and they did not speak to the media. After so many years off waiting to interview the shopkeepers, I was finally able to speak to two of them who took on the mafia and won.

A crossroads in the Mediterranean

For centuries, Sicily — the largest island in the Mediterranean — was a crossroads for cultures spanning North Africa, Europe and the Middle East. So far, in 2019 more than 850 migrants have drowned in the sea crossing, since early 2000s more than 34,000 migrants have died crossing the sea and it remains the deadliest sea crossing in the world.

Media coverage of migration in Sicily tends to focus on boats arriving from Libya, carrying mostly African migrants. What is usually missed is that there’s a sizeable Asian population on the island. Their migration journeys differ than those of the young Gambians, Senegalese or Nigerians. They come often via the Middle East and make multiple journeys through several countries before settling in Sicily. They come from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China or Vietnam – and have been settling in Palermo since the 1990s. Estimates suggest there are more than 10,000 Bengalis living in the city. Most of them work in menial jobs or in the informal economy operating carts selling plastic products. In the summer months Bengalis work on Sicily’s beaches, selling sunglasses, hats and beach toys.

For years, Bengali shopkeepers faced threats to pay *pizzo* (extortion money) by mafia-linked criminals operating in Ballarò market. Tazzaful Topu, a young Bengali community activist who grew up in Palermo, said shopkeepers in his tight-knit community would not talk about the demands to pay up “because everyone was afraid.” Topu added that Bengalis who arrived penniless to Palermo in 1990s did not want to put their businesses in harms way. Topu said “people don’t want to make a problem so they stay quiet.” They stayed silent and paid the *pizzo* in order to avoid their shops being robbed.

Aktar Miah was one of those Bengali shopkeepers who had spent years living in fear of the local mafia-linked criminals operating in Ballarò. He even remembers watching

Rubino grew up from a delinquent boy, threatening shopkeepers on a moped with his brother Giuseppe, into a hardened criminal capable of attempted murder in broad daylight.

Shopkeepers like Miah had spent too long coping with this problem. Prior to the shooting of Susso, the local Ballarò mafia had threatened to kill him, to rob his shop. Miah was scared to speak publicly about the daily threats he faced. He was too afraid to even go to the police; instead, like other Bengali shopkeepers in the area, he resorted to handling their security on their own. Most nights, his family would guard his shops, holding their mobile phones close to their chests in case they had to alert other Bengalis to come help them.

After the shooting, Miah felt his community had been left with a stark choice. “It was either go ahead or die, something was going to happen. That’s why we decided to do something.” When he confronted this reality, Miah was inspired to take things into his own hands. As an elder in the Bengali community Miah decided to help orchestrate the act of rebellion against the mafia by joining forces with his fellow migrant shopkeepers.

Most shops near Ballarò market along the city’s main thoroughfares such as Via Maqueda are Bengali-owned. Miah operates his two shops near the road, and said that everyone in the neighbourhood knew the area was dangerous. “Everyone knew not to walk on this or that street,” he said.

In the old days before the attack, he knew not to only avoid certain streets but was also too afraid to even walk his daughter to school. Every morning on the school run his daughter would ask her father: “Why don't you take me to school?” After all, her school was only 30 meters’ walk from his shop. He was afraid to tell her the truth. “I was scared when I saw them [the mafia]. I wouldn't look ahead of me.”

On a sticky July lunchtime, I went to meet Miah at the Addiopizzo offices a short walk from his shops on Via Maqueda to Via Lincoln—a wide boulevard near the city’s railway station past the Bengali street vendors selling iPhone covers and sunglasses. Past the Chinese garment stores, the Tunisian-run kebab restaurant, and the young Sicilians riding their mopeds furiously through this ancient, vibrant city.

Miah was with Daniele, an Addiopizzo activist, in their large open-plan office. Anti-mafia posters adorn the walls. Miah was one of the first Bengalis to arrive in Palermo in the 1990s. He came alone from Bangladesh in January 1997. Before arriving on the island, he considered migrating to Britain because he knew a lot of Bengalis there from his city of Sylhet in eastern Bangladesh. He said he came to Palermo to improve his life and in 2002 he set up one of the city’s first money-transfer Internet shop. His wife joined in 2007, and a son was born in 2009, his daughter followed in 2011. Miah is now one of the most established Bengalis in the city.

His friend Amir Ali arrived to Italy 1991 from Bangladesh via Jordan — living for a time in Rome before settling in Palermo. He then slowly built a business empire in the city.

Today Ali owns several major businesses in the city, a success story of the multicultural reality that has reshaped this city. He chose Palermo he said because of the “temperature and the people: it was like the Middle East.”

But there was also the mafia. Ali was forced to pay the *pizzo* when he began operating a myriad of shops in the Ballarò area and on Via Maqueda. But it did not stop there, he said.

“It didn’t stop with paying, that was the problem. It went beyond that. They were making threats to the others — those that didn’t pay — threatening violence, breaking the windows, threatening the customers.”

The criminals would deliberately drive past his shops on Via Maqueda, intimidating him. “They threatened children, showed off their guns, put it on the table, demanded money. That’s when I thought that the police couldn’t do anything, that was the point at which I was really desperate,” he said.

For Ali, these weren’t ordinary criminals, but mafioso. “Paying protection money meant that they were mafiosi. That’s what I heard. I didn’t think it would happen to me too” he said. He was forced to pay each week. A young Sicilian would stand in front of his store, locking eyes the moment he’d step outside.

They used a well-known tactic, asking money to help people in prison. Then, each week, another €50, €60. It wasn’t a fixed amount he, told me.

“The people who were sent to ask for it, they didn’t have the courage to explain. I’d prefer if I could say, ‘You’ve come for the money,’ that way I give it to them and that’s it. So it wasn’t a stable thing. They wouldn’t explain.”

Before Ali settled in Palermo, he had never heard of the mafia. “When I came to Ballarò, I didn’t even know there was mafia in Palermo.” Just before Susso was shot, Ali says things had gotten so bad that at the end of 2015 he had considered selling his businesses and leaving Palermo. “In that period, really I thought of closing up everything and leaving.”

The attack on Susso inspired Ali to make a stand. He decided to team up with Miah and other Bengalis. They met up with each other, shared information via their phones. They knew about the work of Addiopizzo and decided they should approach them as a group.

The arrest of Rubino by the police gave courage to Ali and the other shopkeepers to act. “After we saw the law working properly we had the courage, not only for us, but also for our children. It came from that. That was a moment when people started talking, and the fear went away. People felt more free, their mentalities changed”, he said.

Some days later I made my way through the Palermo’s historic Arab neighborhood of La Kalsa to the home of the Bengali shopkeepers’ lawyer, Caradonna. He was one of the

founders of Addiopizzo and had always been committed to fighting the mafia threat in his city. In his teens in the 1980s, he saw Palermo go through the worst period of mafia activities in the city, “I remember what Palermo went through.”

Caradonna said the shopkeepers' case was exceptional for Palermo. “This story was unique. It was the first one from a group of foreigners.”

But when the court case began at the end of 2017, it was difficult for the Bengali shopkeepers; they had to give evidence in front of the accused. Caradonna said the way the Italian trial system is set up means that the accused must see their accuser. For the 11 migrant shopkeepers giving evidence meant confronting Rubino and his associates. “They all know each other, of course they were scared”, Caradonna said.

Once the trial began there were no wiretaps or video evidence – the case solely relied upon witness accounts of the shopkeepers as the primary source of evidence for the prosecution. Caradonna said this put a lot of pressure on the Bengalis who had never entered a courtroom before or had ever given evidence against criminals like this. For Caradonna in his 15-years supporting Addiopizzo this was one of the most “emotional” cases he had ever been involved with.

During the court case Miah had to give evidence in front of Rubino and his family, which took an emotional toll on his wife. But Miah felt he had no choice but to continue to give evidence in court. “There was no going back, we had to deal with it, and going back meant closing the shop and leaving my job.”

Nor did the Bengalis get the support of Palermitan shopkeepers in Ballarò . “The Palermitans in the area wanted to help, but they were even more scared than us. We went to the police and made the complaint, but none of them wanted to press charges. But in their hearts they were with us, but they couldn’t say it”, Miah said.

Palermo noir

Ballarò, Palermo’s oldest street market, was once solid mafia territory. It had been neglected for decades giving the mafia space to rule unopposed. In recent years however, Bengali, Tunisian and African migrants have begun to transform an unloved corner of the city. Ballarò market at times feels more like Middle Eastern bazaar than a European market. The neighbourhood around Ballarò on Via Maqueda and Via Roma up to the railway station has changed, with Bengali vendors selling cheap plastic goods on street corners, with money-transfer business next to African women on the streets braiding the hair of young Sicilians – though underneath this modern, multicultural tapestry exists tensions which speak to the uneasy nexus of the city’s histories.

On entering the central artery of market, a cacophony of sounds hits your senses, as do the smells of Sicilian delicacies wafting through the air – arancini, caponata and fried sardines.

But there is a dark side to Ballarò. Young Sicilians ferry suspicious packages on mopeds through the side streets, and Nigerian gangs operate brothels down the back-streets where madams groom young trafficked girls to work in 'connection houses' as sexual slaves or in domestic settings. While tourists tuck into fish pastas on the seafront, Nigerian women walk along the main road selling their bodies. The city has also long been tainted by its image as a city of mafia that gives Palermo a distinctly *noir* atmosphere.

The court judgment has shown that the Sicilian mafia, known as Cosa Nostra, has changed – transforming from a centrally organized entity led by prominent families into street-gang type activities targeting the city's increasingly large migrant population. At its height, the Cosa Nostra could threaten prominent local figures. On May 23, 1992, magistrate Giovanni Falcone was assassinated in the Capaci bombing. Some two months later, his friend and fellow anti-mafia magistrate Paolo Borsellino was also killed in a car bombing in Palermo.

Since those days, the power of the Cosa Nostra has been ebbing away from them so that some now say the reign of terror of the Cosa Nostra is coming to an end, especially its ability to target the state. The Cosa Nostra is now disordered and internally fragmented.

Settimino Mineo is the 'Godfather' and alleged leader of the Cosa Nostra. In December, he was arrested with more than 40 other mobsters on charges of extortion, arson, and possession of illegal weapons. It was a huge blow to the mafia.

However, the arrests have left behind something of a power vacuum. Under the old rules, *pizzo* would be paid to the mafia to avoid the threat of violence — it was a psychological tool, the threat — but the Bengali shopkeepers instead faced a less predictable criminality: disorganized and more violent.

Nowadays, the most vital opposition to the mafia in Sicily comes not from the police or state but migrants in Ballarò market. The Cosa Nostra once one of Europe's most powerful criminal organisations has declined in its power hit hard by the economic crisis in Italy with their traditional income from the construction trade dwindling and their ranks reduced by successive arrests.

Political change is also in the air. Sumi Dalia Aktar is the first Bengali politician in Sicily; she was elected as local councillor for the centre-left Partito Democratico, current coalition partners of the Five-Star Movement. She says she is proud of her community because they have shown their strength by standing up to the mafia. For Aktar the court case has proven beyond doubt her communities commitment to their city. "We have demonstrated our act of courage by denouncing the mafia and the *pizzo* in Ballarò," she said.

Caradonna said this case has led to the "liberation" of the Ballarò neighborhood. "This was the importance of the trial. The liberation of a whole street, a whole neighborhood." When the judge read out the judgments back in April, Caradonna said, there was silence in the courtroom. "That moment was very special, it was the final act of a whole journey

that had gone on for three years.”

This case marks an important moment in the recent migration histories of Palermo – a moment in which the city’s new residents were able to challenge the long hold the mafia has over the island and lead the way in the broader fight against the criminal activities of mafia-linked criminals in Palermo.

And while they may have faced down the mafioso's threats, but today the Bengalis are facing changing political realities in Italy. And they are worried about their future in Italy.

The political atmosphere in Italy has become very toxic: none more so than in Sicily, which has been the bottleneck of Europe's migrant crisis as well as the key transit zone for migrants moving from North Africa.

Even if the political situation has hardened against migrants in Italy in recent months with harsh rhetoric from former Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and leader of the far-right Lega Nord. In Palermo at least, Bengali migrants have enjoyed the support of the city’s mayor, Leoluca Orlando, who has stood up to the government in Rome.

Still councillor Aktar worries about the recent shifts in current Italian political discourses towards anti-migration.

“I am scared for myself, for my community,” she said. “I am scared for the children who are born here.”

Despite such concerns, for Miah at least Palermo has become “very calm.” He hasn’t heard about any burglaries since the spring, and he and his family have lost their fear.

“For my children, there isn’t any fear. That’s gone down, and surely will in the future too. They’ll also become Palermitans.”

“Now I go to Ballarò without problems,” he said. “I can take my daughter to school.”

Some names have been changed to protect identities.

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