

'Gomorra' writer faces jail threat in libel battle with deputy PM

Anti-mafia campaigner Roberto Saviano tells *Ed Vulliamy* that Italy is using the law to neutralise opposition

Roberto Saviano, the anti-mafia writer and campaigner, faces up to three years in prison after being summoned to stand trial on charges of libelling Italy's interior minister and deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini.

Saviano – who lives under state protection following mafia death threats – has received a summons to stand trial from prosecutors in Rome following a writ for criminal libel issued last summer by Salvini. In Italy, libel at this level falls under the penal, not civil, code.

Saviano told the *Observer*: "I face trial for my opinions. It's a form of extortion by Salvini, making a legal target of his critics. I am the means by which he can communicate his intentions towards everyone else." The news brought an outcry from literary and journalistic quarters, led by the French publisher Antoine Gallimard, and novelist Salman Rushdie, who told *La Repubblica* newspaper: "We writers will always stand by Roberto Saviano. We condemn this shameful attack on his rights, yet again."

Speaking from Paris, Saviano said that the charge was not a personal one from Salvini, but official: the writ was submitted on ministry-headed paper "and Salvini has asked

to be assisted by state lawyers". The irony is total: the same ministry has been charged with protecting Saviano with an armed escort while on Italian soil, since he was condemned by the Camorra crime syndicate of Naples for his book *Gomorra* of 2006.

The indictment has its origins in a long-standing duel between Saviano and Salvini, mostly over the latter's stance on migration; Saviano has repeatedly defended the rights of migrants to land in Italy, while Salvini has blocked Italian ports to them.

In recent years, Saviano turned to connections between Salvini's party, La Lega – formerly the Northern League – and Calabrian 'Ndrangheta mafia syndicates, after the conviction of the league's former treasurer, Francesco Belsito, for laundering money through the 'Ndrangheta De Stefano clan, and a miasma of occult and neo-fascist interests. A book was published last month, *Il Libro Nero della Lega* – the league's black book – by Giovanni Tizian and Stefano Vergine, detailing further alleged criminal connections.

In June last year Saviano called Salvini "Il Ministro della Mala Vita" – roughly, minister of the criminal underworld. Salvini responded a month later with the writ. He told the *Observer*: "This indicates an increasing authoritarianism. The aim is to use the law to neutralise any further opposition. The problem is that while Salvini has created consensus, his opponents are fragmented by personal and sectarian divisions.

"Support has been wonderful," added Saviano, "in France and

Mexico, where they have published my articles, Spain, Britain and the US. In Italy it's much colder, partly because they're tired of me, partly because they're scared."

The loudest voices – apart from novelist Erri de Luca – have come from outside Italy: Spanish writers Javier Cercas and Manuel Vilas, Chilean Luis Sepúlveda, Algerian Kamel Daoud and Americans Erica Jong and Nathan Englander. Other messages have come from British authors Irvine Welsh and Hanif Kureishi, who said: "Freedom of expression no longer exists if a person can be sued for his or her opinions." The writ, said Kureishi, "deeply offends Italy's reputation as a European nation of artists, writers and philosophers". Writers' institutions have added their condemnation.

Musician John Cale, once of the Velvet Underground, said: "Saviano's writing is enervating and a moral alert to everyone. The niceties of Italian penal law are too tricky to go into, so I wish him good riddance for the charge."

Mexican-American Jennifer Clement, president of PEN International, said: "Roberto Saviano has repeatedly risked his life to expose the truth about Italy's criminal networks. Italy should end the use of criminal law in regard to defamation."

Salvini's cabinet did not return calls for a statement, but the minister has described his initiative, mysteriously, as "a caress and a lawsuit". The writ calls Saviano's posts "detrimental to the honour and reputation of the undersigned and the ministry itself".



The writer Roberto Saviano, left, and La Lega's Matteo Salvini have long been at odds over immigration.