

Cuomo's Top Aide, Melissa DeRosa, Resigns as He Fights to Survive

The governor's strategist helped lead efforts to retaliate against one of the women who accused him of sexual harassment, the attorney general's report found.



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[New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo will resign after sexual harassment investigation.]

ALBANY, N.Y. — Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's top aide, Melissa DeRosa, said late Sunday that she had resigned, a move that came as the governor fought for political survival after a report from the New York State attorney general concluded he had sexually harassed nearly a dozen women.

Her resignation meant that Mr. Cuomo, a third-term Democrat, lost one of his most loyal aides and trusted strategists while facing an imminent threat of impeachment in the State Legislature and calls to step down from a constellation of top officials in his party, including President Biden and the House speaker, Nancy Pelosi.

Ms. DeRosa had stood by the governor's side for years even as his inner circle shrank in size and many of the top staffers who had helped first elect him in 2010 left the administration.

The state attorney general report found that Ms. DeRosa had spearheaded efforts to retaliate against one of the women who had spoken out publicly about her allegation in December.

After becoming a fixture in Mr. Cuomo's coronavirus briefings during the pandemic, Ms. DeRosa also had come under fire earlier this year for her involvement in the administration's efforts to obscure the full extent of nursing home deaths, a matter that is under investigation by federal authorities and the

State Assembly.

Ms. DeRosa, who is 38, said in a statement on Sunday that “the past two years have been emotionally and mentally trying.”

“It has been the greatest honor of my life to serve the people of New York for the past 10 years. New Yorkers’ resilience, strength, and optimism through the most difficult times has inspired me every day,” she said. “I am forever grateful for the opportunity to have worked with such talented and committed colleagues on behalf of our state.”

Her departure sent shock waves through Albany as political observers rushed to decipher what her resignation meant for Mr. Cuomo’s future. The governor has not left Albany since the report’s release on Tuesday as he conferred with advisers over how to proceed.

The report by the attorney general had been more scathing and more damaging to Mr. Cuomo than those in his orbit had expected, according to two people with knowledge of the discussions among Mr. Cuomo’s aides. The report included a previously undisclosed allegation from an unnamed female state trooper from Mr. Cuomo’s protective detail who said Mr. Cuomo touched her stomach and ran his finger down her back in a suggestive manner. Mr. Cuomo’s lawyer, Rita Glavin, has said the governor planned to address the trooper’s allegation “soon.”

The new allegation from the trooper crippled one of the strategies that the governor and his allies had been poised to use, making it all but impossible to dismiss the report as simply rehashed accusations. The attorney general had begun the investigation after allegations from several women surfaced in February and March.

In the wake of the report, Ms. DeRosa determined that Mr. Cuomo no longer had a path to stay in office and that she would no longer be willing to stand up in public as his defender, one of the people said, requesting anonymity to discuss private conversations in the middle of criminal investigations into the governor.

Ms. DeRosa informed the governor of her decision to resign earlier on Sunday, the person said. Neither Ms. DeRosa nor one of her lawyers responded to a request for further comment. A spokesman for the governor, Richard Azzopardi, also did

not respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Cuomo has denied touching anyone inappropriately, and has said that some of the 11 women who accused him of harassment may have misinterpreted his jokes, hugs and kisses on the cheek as improper. His lawyers have gone on camera to mount a rigorous defense, describing the investigation by the state attorney general, Letitia James, as biased, rushed and sloppy.

Ms. DeRosa announced her resignation the night before an interview with one of Mr. Cuomo's accusers, Brittany Commisso, was scheduled to air on "CBS This Morning."

Ms. Commisso, an executive assistant who had remained anonymous until Sunday, accused Mr. Cuomo of groping her breast while they were alone in the Executive Mansion late last year, one of the most serious claims leveled against the governor. She filed a criminal complaint with the Albany County sheriff department, raising the possibility that Mr. Cuomo could face criminal charges.

As secretary to the governor, Ms. DeRosa was the most powerful appointed official in the state. When Mr. Cuomo appointed her to the post in 2017, she became one of the youngest people to hold that position, and the first woman in the role. She joined the Cuomo administration in 2013 as communications director and was promoted two years later to chief of staff.

The attorney general's report painted an unflattering portrait of Ms. DeRosa and her role in fostering a toxic workplace and attacking the credibility of Lindsey Boylan, a former economic development official who had accused Mr. Cuomo of sexual harassment in December.

After Ms. Boylan posted her allegation on Twitter, Ms. DeRosa orchestrated an effort among state officials and outside allies to leak Ms. Boylan's personnel records, which contained sensitive information, to undermine her credibility. She also helped draft, review and circulate a disparaging letter that was never published, but nonetheless assailed Ms. Boylan's character.

As part of those efforts, Ms. DeRosa also instructed a former staffer to call a female Cuomo staff member who had voiced support for Ms. Boylan on Twitter, mine her for information and record the phone conversation, the report said.

As Mr. Cuomo's right-hand woman, she was deeply involved in navigating the governor's priorities through the State Legislature and helped Mr. Cuomo secure policies such as the \$15 minimum wage and paid family leave. She was also chair of the New York State Council on Women and was vocal about women's reproductive issues.

Ms. DeRosa was seen in the State Capitol as a protective, fierce defender of Mr. Cuomo, known to treat officials and lawmakers with some of the intimidating and heavy-handed tactics for which her boss was known.

The daughter of Giorgio DeRosa, an influential lobbyist, she was drafted to work for Mr. Cuomo after serving as chief of staff to Eric Schneiderman, the former state attorney general who resigned in 2018 after four women accused him of physical abuse.

Ms. DeRosa was mentioned nearly 200 times in the state attorney general's 165-page report, most prominently for her role in handling Ms. Boylan's allegation. In one instance, however, Ms. DeRosa told investigators she had become upset after learning about the allegations from one of the women, Charlotte Bennett, 26, a former aide to Mr. Cuomo who said the governor asked her whether she was monogamous and if she had sex with older men.

While the governor and Ms. DeRosa were traveling in a car, she said she told Mr. Cuomo, "I can't believe that this happened. I can't believe you put yourself in a situation where you would be having any version of this conversation."

After confronting Mr. Cuomo, Ms. DeRosa said she got out of the car, which had stopped at a traffic light. Around the same time, a new policy was put in place to prohibit Mr. Cuomo from being left alone with young female staff members to protect him from allegations of harassment.

J. David Goodman and Shane Goldmacher contributed reporting.

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