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Italy

A new political framework

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The perspective of a victory for Silvio Berlusconi in Italy's parliamentary elections on May 13, 2001 led to fairly lively reactions in the political circles and influential press organs of several European countries, which expressed two major concerns: the use that a personality with such economic power could make of access to political power and the threat that a coalition comprising, beyond the Berlusconi formation, a right populist party like Umberto Bossi's Northern League and the heirs of the neo-fascists, National Alliance, would represent for the peninsula's democratic institutions.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/berlusconi2.jpg>] Berlusconi votes...

These same fears were exploited by the ruling centre-left coalition (known as the Olive Tree) to convince left electors to support them, despite the disappointing performances of the Prodi, D'Alema and Amato governments, which have succeeded each other in the course of the last five years. The results of the May 13 elections, from which Berlusconi emerged as incontestably victorious in terms of seats both in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate, can only accentuate concern and provoke a wave of disarray among large layers of electors.

Against those who spoke of a "tidal wave" or a "plebiscite" in Berlusconi's favour, we should first recall the figures. The centre-right coalition overall won a large majority of seats, but not the majority of votes. What is more, in relation to 1996 it lost more than a million votes (the number of abstentions having not changed much). The Olive Tree virtually maintained its vote and if one adds the votes of the PRC and other formations belonging to no coalition, the total is higher than that of the centre-right.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/genoa1-3.jpg>] ...Genoa demonstrates

Moreover, while Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia, made palpable progress, it did not exceed the 30 % already reached in the European elections of 1994. Moreover, its advance was essentially at the expense of its allies, notably the Northern League which did not even reach the quorum of 4% necessary to participate in the proportional distribution of seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

Finally, to give an idea of the overall situation, we have to take account of what happened two weeks after the parliamentary elections. The Olive Tree recorded an undeniable success at the second round of the partial municipal elections, retaining notably the majority in cities like Rome, Turin and Naples (the centre-right won Milan in the first round). [1]

These results cannot however hide the fact that the strongest party of the Olive Tree, the Left Democrats (DS), suffered a very serious setback (16.6% against 21.1% in 1996) whereas a heterogeneous centrist formation, which had been part of the former Christian Democrats and included the leader of the coalition, Francesco Rutelli, scored to general surprise, 14.5%.

That said, we must pose three questions: what does the coalition of Berlusconi represent socially and politically? Has it changed since 1994? Will it be able to stabilise the Italian situation after nearly 10 years of crises and political upheavals?

Berlusconi II

After Berlusconi's victory in 1994 we wrote: "Forza Italia was born from the initiative of a big employer who, to achieve his goals, has shamelessly used the structures of his financial kingdom and the powerful media he owns.

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His 'party' has thus been created from above and is totally identified with his person. It would not be abusive to speak of a Bonapartist undertaking, as much because of the decisive role of the would-be charismatic leader as the hegemonic mediator role that this leader has played to unify the different components of the right. There was a vacuum to fill and Berlusconi understood it at time: there is the key to his success". [2]

This vacuum appeared after the collapse of the long-standing coalition based on the alliance between the Christian Democracy and the Socialist Party of Craxi, which had reigned for a quarter century. The new centre-left, led by the formation originating from the old PCI (subsequently the Party of the Democratic Left, PDS, and then Left Democrats, DS) wished to be candidate to the succession.

However, all those who, for diverse reasons, could not accept such a succession, sought another solution and relied on Berlusconi. His rapid defeat, following the contradictions, which emerged within his heterogeneous coalition and under the pressure of powerful mass movements in defence of pensions in autumn 1994, opened the road to the coming to power of the centre-left after the elections of 1996.

It goes without saying that it is above all the approach of the centre-left, on both the socio-economic front (acceptance, indeed idealisation, of neo-liberalism) and in the area of international policy (unconditional support for the war against Serbia and the new NATO pact) which has allowed the centre-right to regroup and finally return to power.

However, it should be added that Berlusconi had drawn the lessons of both 1994 and 1996 (when he fell from power following the rupture with the Northern League). He structured his party much more, trying to root it in the so-called civil society so that it no longer appeared as a replica of his business undertakings.

He gave his support to successful mayoral candidates of the centre-right at the municipal elections; independent personalities like the mayor of Milan, re-elected on May 13, or the mayor of Bologna. He gave himself an image as a responsible statesman, supporting the approach of the centre left government in the EU and aligning himself with the Balkan wars.

As we have stressed previously in IV, [3] he obtained an international profile through his participating in the European Popular Party in the Strasbourg parliament. Nine months before the elections he sealed a coalition with the National Alliance, which henceforth gave up challenging him for the leadership of the coalition and he re-established links with the Northern League through a marriage of interests which achieved the double goal of making electoral success possible and cutting his ally down to size.

Is it appropriate to describe Berlusconi's approach as "populism"? Obviously any comparison with the populism of the 19th century in Russia and the populisms of the 1940s and 1950s in Latin America would be devoid of any content.

On the other hand, such a characterisation has, at least partially, a meaning if it describes a political-ideological approach with the following traits: the claim to represent the 'people' in opposition to the politicians, placing oneself alongside the citizens; a description of reality in the form of the systematic and un-nuanced denigration of the misdeeds of adversaries and competitors; the definition of simple and 'non-political' remedies; a stress on the urgency of reforming the existing socio-institutional framework. [4]

Moreover, Berlusconi tried several times to appear as a partisan of a less orthodox neo-liberalism than the Olive tree coalition, advocating not a market economy alone, but a 'social market economy'.

It remains true that Berlusconi owes his victory above all to his ability to express the sensibilities, sentiments, regressive, indeed frankly reactionary impulses that are currently extant in broad layers of society. That is why he effectively enjoys a popular support, which is not limited absolutely to certain regions of the country, although he is still relatively weaker in the regions of central Italy.

It is more alarming, on the other hand, that the centre-right has registered an extraordinary success in Sicily, which undoubtedly indicates that the mafia believes that under Berlusconi it can continue to manage more tranquilly its affairs and its own 'society'.

As for the Catholic church, while it cannot influence elections as it did in the golden years of Christian Democracy - and while maintaining a certain prudence, it rightly considers that some of its demands in the field of 'defence of the family', private schools and abortion could now have a greater audience at the parliamentary and electoral level. [5]

Finally, Berlusconi now enjoys, much more than in 1994 and 1996, support or the favourable disposition of very broad layers of employers, who, certainly, have not had very much to complain about with the centre left governments but have never ceased to advocate still more radical neo-liberal measures and a greater governmental stability.

The most symbolic message is that of Gianni Agnelli, [6] the recognised doyen of the Italian employers, who fiercely defended Berlusconi against the criticism of the foreign press. It is true that in 1994 also Agnelli had voted for the centre right government in the Senate, but he did not support Berlusconi's choice as Prime minister.

Moreover, the employers' organisation in industry, the powerful Confindustria, is now led by a young turk, Antonio D'Amato, who makes no secret of his desire to exploit the new political framework to push further his anti-worker offensive.

The democratic framework in danger?

Both in Italy and abroad there are those who speak of the danger that the coming to power of the Berlusconi government could represent for the democratic institutions set up with the adoption of the Constitution of 1948.

The question should be approached under several angles. The centre right has long favoured a constitutional reform, which, in its words, should take place in line with the procedures envisaged by the Constitution itself. In all, it seeks to give a presidential stamp to the Italian political system and increase regional autonomy.

It would, it seems, challenge the first part of the Constitution, notably the articles concerning the social inspiration and the role of the state. However, nothing precise has been advanced until now by the coalition as such. It is necessary moreover to suppose, at least for the instant, that Berlusconi does not intend to challenge in any way the European framework.

That said, the fears inspired by the fact that the control of the executive power will belong to the richest man in the country, forcefully present in several economic sectors and controlling nearly all the national private TV channels, are completely legitimate.

The last electoral campaign has given us a foretaste of this danger.

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Berlusconi used his gigantic resources, which bear no comparison to those at the disposal of the other candidates, not to mention those of the PRC. However, the centre-left in government has also shamelessly used the public television network in contempt of the most elementary democratic rules.

If we needed convincing that in a bourgeois institutional framework democratic rights are often an empty shell for common mortals, that is all those who do not have wealth or political power, the recent Italian electoral campaign proved it beyond doubt.

More generally, we have noted several times and we note again a profound tendency at work in the countries that claim to be the most democratic. The citizens are increasingly deprived of the power of real decision-making. The macro-economic choices which determine, in the last analysis, their fate; strategic political and still more military choices do not depend in the slightest on the citizens.

The gravest critique that can be made of the centre left governments is that they have not counteracted this tendency; on the contrary they have deepened it.

The decision taken by Amato's government after May 13, to prepare a land, sea and air blockade of the city of Genoa before the G8 meeting, is the latest example of it. Thus, the task of the future government will be sensibly facilitated. If it chooses repression, it can cover itself by the decisions already taken, if it chooses to allow the demonstrations, it will appear more democratic than its predecessors.

Beyond the drifts of the centre-left and what will happen in July in Genoa, there is not the least doubt that this structural tendency towards an erosion of the democratic framework will sharpen under the Berlusconi government. To what extent and with what outcome will depend fundamentally on the socio-economic dynamic in Italy, the EU and in the final analysis the world.

It is true that Berlusconi will have difficulties with his allies, who have emerged fairly frustrated from the election and he will also face some centrifugal regional tendencies on the institutional front that he will have exacerbated by his opposition to the centre left governments in the goal of winning the support of the Northern League.

However, since the votes of the League's deputies in the two chambers are not indispensable to a centre right governmental majority, we should not envisage a repetition of what happened in late 1994 during the conflict with Bossi.

That is why the future of the new government will be conditioned first by its capacity to keep its electoral promises, notably through big tax reductions and pension increases, which will not be easy in the current framework of economic slowdown and respect for the stability pact of European monetary union.

If Italy experiences significant growth and if, in such a context, Berlusconi could re-establish a rapport with the trade union federations, the hypothesis of a consolidation of the stability of the new political framework for a certain period cannot be ruled out. However, for the moment such a dynamic is not apparent.

Moreover, in recent months there has been an undeniable revival of struggles, even if not yet generalised.

The metalworkers, still the most important sector of the working class, have been engaged in a prolonged battle for the renewal of the collective agreement and during a recent national strike some hundreds of thousands of workers filled the streets of a number of towns, in particular Turin and Milan.

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Meanwhile, waves of student struggles occurred in March and April in several university centres, notably Rome. Moreover, the movement against capitalist globalisation continues to grow, which could have positive effects on both the political and cultural level.

Thus, the mobilisation against the G-8 summit in July in Genoa is more than ever a major rendezvous.

[1] In Rome and Naples the victorious municipal coalition included the PRC.

[2] IV, No. 257, June 1994 p. 33.

[3] [IV, No. 330](#), April 2001

[4] Guido Caldiron, a young activist from a Marxist background in the PRC, has recently written an interesting article on the different forms of populism (Il Manifesto, May 12, 2001).

[5] It should not be forgotten that the centre-left had already made very important concessions to the Church, for example concerning private schools.

[6] Fiat boss-ed.