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Italy

Against the Italian intervention in Afghanistan

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At the end of July, the Italian government led by Romano Prodi asked the Italian parliament to vote the continuation of the Italian military mission in Afghanistan. As readers of International Viewpoint know (see appeal) dissenting parliamentarians led by the Sinistra Critica (Critical Left) representatives waged a campaign against the decision of the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) to support this governmental move.

As the Unione government has a big majority in the Chamber of Deputies, the votes against by SC deputy Salvatore Cannavó and three others were not a problem for the government. However, in the Senate the government has a majority of only two, and SC has two senators. The government therefore decided to make the vote a question of confidence. After a broad discussion, Sinistra Critica decided its senators should on this occasion vote for (the right wing did not vote and left the chamber). This vote was linked however to a statement, now signed by 16 senators, that they would not vote for this military mission when it next comes up in 6 months' time.

We publish here the speech by SC senator Franco Turigliatto to the Senate during the debate.

"I am speaking in this assembly with concern, if not to say distress. The measure under discussion euphemistically refers to international missions, but as everyone knows, we are talking about war, the very war that as we speak, once again in the Middle East, is destroying the lives of hundreds of women, children and men. Yesterday's conference in Rome was unable to impose a ceasefire or even to have attempted to request it.

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The government has made this measure a vote of confidence. I have noted the political balance with which minister Chiti has approached the problem under discussion with the so-called dissenting opinions in terms of the respective positions and disagreements.

1) I will vote in favour of the vote of confidence for a single reason, out of a sense of loyalty and commitment towards the electorate that has voted out the rightwing parties and allowed for this government to take form, towards the workers who these weeks have told me they appreciate our battle, but at the same time have asked me not to bring the government down, to allow them to continue to evaluate its actions over the coming months. However, this decision does not take away from my underlying irreducible and unchangeable dissent with regard to a measure (even taking into account the massive demand for withdrawal from Iraq), which simultaneously contemplates the continuation of the war mission in Afghanistan.

2) The fact that this mission is indeed a war is affirmed by all military analysts and NATO itself. It is no coincidence that NATO is calling upon its member nations to redouble their efforts in terms of men and resources, and that in February of the current year, it already changed the rules of engagement to prepare for the Taliban offensive. This is a war mission that is part of the new NATO's strategic project that emerged from 1999 Washington Pact and foresees an unnatural and illegitimate role for the Atlantic Alliance as "world policeman".

3) It is precisely this nature of the conflict and of the matters we are currently discussing that have led me to view the compromise made by the majority of the government as completely insufficient, as it was unable to insert any element of countertendency into a foreign military intervention project that remains permeated by the multilateralist

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philosophy and the concept of "humanitarian war", the same that characterised the Kosovo conflict.

Not only does the government not intend to carry out any exit strategy but also it is going so far as to reinforce the overall military purview to be implemented in Afghanistan and in the Enduring Freedom mission linked to that conflict.

4) Furthermore, this fundamental disagreement is in line with the standpoint that the forces of the radical and pacifist left have stood for and practised over the past five years, that is, from the time the vote on the Afghanistan mission brought a commitment from this parliament. This line of conduct is perfectly coherent with the positions of the peace movement, taking a stand from October 2001 on the struggle against the US war in Afghanistan and subsequently, against sending Italian soldiers into that theatre of war.

A coherence that we fully support and which can certainly not be confined within the game of parliamentary tactics or governmental geometrics. Moreover, because no governmental programme has ever decided to confront a question on which nobody can claim an electoral commitment.

During these weeks, I've never felt anachronistic, a rebel, or a dissident. On the contrary, never as in these days have I felt so in tune with the 62% who want the troops withdrawn from Afghanistan, rising to 73% among Unione voters. Think about it: how can we fail to understand that the presence of foreign troops cannot be seen by local people as interference, domination and manipulation. How can we fail to understand that our soldiers are viewed as occupiers, like the other military forces taking part in a war with a tragic balance sheet of civilian victims (97%)?

NO, government representatives, no, Members of Parliament, it is not just, it is a grave error to continue along this path, we can't keep our soldiers in Afghanistan to kill and be killed.

5) The government's decision to make this measure a confidence vote requires that we sacrifice our fundamental dissent so as not to endanger the government. It is a painful choice, weighing heavily on our conscience and political convictions. We feel that we have been subjected to blackmail that we will no longer accept in the future.

The government should take note of this because on the war we cannot go along with a future vote of confidence. If the executive persists in its commitment to a war mission it will do so with the votes of those who support this choice; we will vote no. Just as we will vote no to other military operations, such as the Lebanon operation aired in NATO circles.

If Italy really wants to make a contribution to peace in the Middle East, it will take a forthright stand against Israel's policy; bombing a defenceless country indiscriminately, with a substantial consensus among Western countries, provoking incredible devastation among the civilian population.

It would struggle for the construction of a real Palestinian state and in this framework, for a UN interposition mission, not only between Israel and Lebanon but also on the Gaza Strip and on the 1967 border between Israel and the West Bank! It would make it clear to the Israeli government that if Israel is entitled to stability, this will be possible if it recognises the rights of the other peoples of the Middle East, starting with the Palestinian people, that are currently crushed and denied.

6) The peace movement is our real partner in dialogue in this matter. Nowadays, this movement is seeking to re-establish its own dynamics, its own ideality and its own ambitions for peace. We believe we have contributed actively, with our explicit statement of dissent, of reopening a discussion that already seemed closed.

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Different initiatives have been taken in Italy, with our contribution, and others will be in future. We will take part in all of these, to get to the next vote on military missions with the greatest possible forces against the extension of unacceptable military operations. We will do this with a clear, transparent position; we will do it without being subjected to any further blackmail and intimidation. We will do it in the name of peace and of the political coherence that characterises our commitment, knowing that we are only a part of the movement, but a necessary one.

Senate intervention 27/7/2006

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