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Italy

Salvini pushed back but hard right remains strong

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Regional elections in two parts of Italy, Emilia Romagna and Calabria were held on Sunday 26 January. They were seen as posing a big challenge to the government if Salvini's Lega (League, formerly Northern League) won.

During the last days of the electoral battle in Emilia Romagna, Salvini and his media circus assembled at the intercom of a council block. He pushed the button of a flat where one of his Lega local supporters had said a Tunisian drug dealer lived. Salvini then harangued the young man, whose father had been injured in an industrial accident, about his supposed drug-dealing. Even the deadened Italian mass media, so accustomed to Salvini's antics, were a little shocked by this fascist vigilante scenario. But it brought together two sides of Salvini's dog whistle racist politics – migrants and crime. (You can watch it here)

Salvini had said he was going to 'liberate' a region that historically had been a stronghold of the wartime resistance then of the Italian Communist Party and its subsequent centre left configurations. As the eventual winner Bonaccini from the PD (Democratic Party) noted drily before the results, the people of this region were liberated nearly 70 years ago from the fascists.

The leader of the hard right Lega had staked a lot of his personal political capital in the campaign to replicate the first place the party had won in the European elections in this area. In the end his coalition lost by eight points (51 to 43). The polls had been calling it in the Lega's favour last November and nip and tuck in the final polls a week before the vote.

One extraordinary turnaround was the increase of 30 percentage points in the turnout to 67%. Many left and progressive voters who had become disillusioned with the pro-austerity policies of the PD returned to the polling stations. A key reason for this was the mobilisation of the single issue anti-Lega campaign led by the Sardines.

Sardine movement plays progressive role

After the loss of Umbria, another traditional centre left area, last November, a group of four thirty year olds decided to do something about what seemed the irresistible rise of the Lega. They went on social media and called people onto the streets in Bologna's central square. Five thousand turned out, dwarfing a Lega gathering on the same day. Their imaginative intervention used the idea of the massing of sardines to counter the rise of the Lega monster. It also had some resonance because of Salvini's penchant for hanging out at the beach at popular resorts like Milano Marittima on the Adriatic coast.

People made cardboard cut outs and even more artistic models and they repeated this in city after city culminating in the massive Rome demonstration of more than 100,000. On the Sunday before the vote in Emilia Romagna they brought 40,000 onto Bologna's main square. The Sardines had a national meeting bringing together the local organisers of the demos and produced a statement focusing simply on the need to combat the Lega but also for more moral, 'educated' politics opposed to the hatefulness of right wing populism. Rational, informed debate was counter-posed to politics by tweet and gesture.

Theoretically they talked about rebuilding a positive intermediary process and structures between the people and politicians. They also called for the repeal of the repressive, anti-migrant laws, sponsored by Salvini before he split

from the first Conte led government in August. Rallies were organised in a broad based way, political parties were not invited to speak or bring their banners.

The radical left and the Sardines

Some on the radical left have criticised the ‘superficial good manners’ of the Sardines politics and the way the movement is not really democratically structured. Talk of love and being nice evacuates a certain necessary degree of class hatred within the reality of class struggles. Claiming the high ground of being educated (‘educato’- this also has a meaning of well-behaved in Italian too) does not always work against right wing populists who have a lot of support among non-graduate working people. It can be seen as patronising – similar to the errors of some middle class remainers denouncing the ‘stupidity’ of Brexit voters.

The other critique some of the left have made is that objectively, if not subjectively, the Sardines are primarily boosting the forces of the PD whose politics of austerity in government is one of the very reasons that the Lega is so strong today. Indeed Zingaretti, the PD leader made a big show of thanking the Sardines after the victory on Sunday. Although the Sardines called to vote against the Lega they made no specific call for a vote for the PD slate. Their leaders have said they personally identify with centre left culture.

Given the extraordinary low level of industrial struggles or social movements today in Italy it is very difficult to see a more obviously leftist campaign roll back Salvini. The groups to the left of the PD such as Potere al Popolo (Power to the People) that stood in the election got only about 1% of the vote. An ecologist slate that was essentially a satellite of the PD got 3.3%.

The task of rebuilding a more united anti-capitalist front in active struggles is still essential if the option is to be more than stopping the hard right and then putting up with a centre left government that accepts EU imposed austerity policies. It seems tactically correct to salute the positive impact of the Sardines, to respect its broad based, anti-hard right framework but to work within it and alongside it to ensure, for instance, that the current government defends migrant rights.

Some of those new participants in politics, including many young people, can possibly be won to more openly anti-capitalist politics if the radical left is listening and talking to them in their campaigns. The left will not be able to do that if it acts as if the Sardines are a problem or obstacle. The Sardines are holding a national meeting in March in Naples to plan their next steps. One issue worth raising in a sensitive way is how such a movement is structured.

Changes within the right wing coalition

Although the Lega was rolled back in Emilia Romagna, its vote as a party only went down three points to 30% and the right wing coalition won easily in the other regional election in Calabria. There was no Sardines’ impact on voting. Turnout was very low showing how demoralised and disorientated working people are in a region where organised crime and corruption are still strong.

The neo-fascist, Meloni-led Fratelli di Italia (Brothers of Italy), doubled their vote to 8.3% in Emilia and got nearly 11% in Calabria only four points behind the PD. On the other hand Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (Go Italy) received less than 3% in Emilia and won the presidency in Calabria but the party slate only got around 12%. Consequently the relationship of forces inside the right has changed. Salvini and the Lega are the hegemonic force with Meloni’s party beginning to overtake Forza Italia. The Lega leader is still well placed to become the biggest single party at the next national elections.

Continued fragility of PD/M5S government

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The Conte-2 government is safe for the moment with the Lega's defeat in Emilia. Salvini's game plan was to win there and proclaim the government no longer had a majority in the country.

However the government is weakened by the rapidly imploding Five Star Movement (MSS). Already over 20 of its MPs have jumped ship to other groupings and Di Maio resigned as leader last week. It scored 3% in Emilia, down nearly 10 points and failed to make the 8% threshold to get into regional assembly in Calabria.

This is incredible given that in the general election just two years ago it was the single biggest party at nearly 33%. In the short term this means that the PD will push for more influence inside the coalition. Unless it can recreate a two party system – which pundits are pontificating about a great deal at the moment – and more importantly get a new electoral law through that favours that outcome, then it is short of obvious coalition partners.

Again the M5S decline favours a return of Salvini to government. The M5S was always potentially unstable with its positioning as neither right nor left. For a time it surfed the anger of many progressive voters who were abandoning the PD as well as a fewer number from the right. Its failure to root itself in the localities or to create democratic structures because of its centralised internet model, and its incompetence where it did win local governments, has led to this crisis.

In the coming period Salvini's Lega, as the main opposition, will continue to be able to channel a lot of the anger against this government since inequality and living standards continue to be among the worst in Europe for working people. At the same time the PD will try to integrate the Sardine mobilisation as far as it can in order to reinvigorate its rather moribund ranks. The anti-capitalist left will relate to the positive upsurge of the Sardines but also try to patiently build up an anti-capitalist opposition. There have been some small positive steps toward that recently through national meetings involving Sinistra Anti-Capitalista (Anticapitalist Left), Rifondazione (Communist Refoundation) and others.

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Source [Socialist Resistance](#).

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