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Italy

The return of Berlusconi?

- IV Online magazine - 2001 - IV330 - April 2001 -

Publication date: Tuesday 3 April 2001

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On May 13 Italy will hold parliamentary elections, as well as municipal elections in many towns including Rome, Milan, Turin and Naples. The results, together with those of the March municipal elections in France and the British general election which seems likely in June will make it possible to draw a meaningful picture of the political trends currently at work in the European Union.

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

If the polls are to be believed, (although the French elections have shown once again their very relative value), the conservative pole, renamed 'House of Liberties', will gain a comfortable majority and Silvio Berlusconi will again be head of government, seven years after his resignation at the end of 1994. The right has already been largely victorious in the regional elections of spring 2000.

Whatever happens, the Italian elections are likely to confirm two phenomena of a more general nature: the volatility of the electorate and the wave of abstentionism. It seems to us unarguable that this stems from the fact that the differences between right and left (or centre-right and centre-left) are being progressively eroded - notably in the area of the essential economic options and the orientations of international politics - hence the disarray of large layers of citizens.

A lamentable balance sheet

What balance sheet can be drawn of the three centre governments (headed respectively by Prodi, D'Alema and Amato) which have succeeded each other over the past five years?

Their supporters say that these governments have scored two major successes: entry into the European Monetary Union (EMU) at the first possible stage through abiding by the parameters laid down at Maastricht; and Italy's fully fledged participation in the "humanitarian war" against Serbia. No further comment is necessary.

In fact on the socio-economic front the centre-left has nothing to be excited about. Italy has in recent years not really experienced an economic upturn and now it is recording a slowing down in relation even to recent predictions.

The crucial disequilibria between the regions of the north and those of the south have in no way been reduced.

The transformation of the labour market has been clearly unfavourable to workers and the other popular layers: part time, fixed contract and temporary work has grown unceasingly and unemployment remains above 10%.

The country's main daily newspaper, *Corriere della sera*, has stressed the significant modification in the distribution of income: between 1980 and 1999 the percentage of incomes derived from waged work fell from 56% to 40% whereas profits and rents have grown significantly. This tendency has not been rectified under any form whatever during the five years of centre-left government.

The balance sheet is hardly better in the area of the much heralded institutional reforms. There has been a partial, so called 'federalist', reform involving greater autonomy for the regions in a guise with dangerous implications in the present context. In the area of education, concessions have been made to private teaching, against the letter and the

spirit of the 1948 Constitution. The main beneficiary has been an increasingly aggressive Catholic church, towards which much servility has been shown, above all during the Jubilee year of 2000.

If the weakening of the centre-left is certainly the consequence of this balance sheet and the resulting disappointment among those who had voted for it 5 years ago, it is also the fruit of the heterogeneity of this coalition, which has led to it getting through three successive prime ministers.

The coalition is currently composed of the Left Democrats (DS, ex-PCI, then ex-PDS), the Italian Popular Party (PPI, former Christian Democrats), Democrats (partisans of Romano Prodi), Greens, Italian Renewal (organized around the former prime minister and current foreign minister, Dini), another formation of Christian Democratic origin, (whose leader, Clemente Mastella, had belonged to the rightwing alliance before supporting the D'Alema government), and finally the Communist Party of Italy (Pcdl) which originates from a split in the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) under the auspices of Armando Cossutta.

It is, then, a fairly varied palette and this is reflected also in the European parliament where the MEPs of the centre left belong to four different groups, indeed to different currents inside the same group.

Beyond all the nuances, to use a euphemism, the major divergence is between those who wish to maintain, more or less, the existing political formations, welded together in a coalition, and those who wish to give birth to a new formation conceived as democrat-progressive, on the model of the US Democratic Party.

What is more, the DS, by far the most important formation, is itself divided. Whereas some, including D'Alema, favour the option of a social democratic party, others, including the current secretary Veltroni, are partisans of a progressive democratic party. A left current exists, although currently very weak, which is critical towards all of this and advocates a rapprochement with the PRC.

As for the partisans of Cossutta, they are happy for the instant to defend their coterie in the hope of gaining some seats in Parliament, courtesy of the DS.

The rescue of Berlusconi

If Berlusconi's fortunes have revived and he can hope to win on May 13, it is above all the centre-left which bears the responsibility, because of its calamitous record and its insistence on persevering in its orientations and its methods.

Its candidate for prime minister, Francesco Rutelli, is waging an electoral campaign similar to that of Berlusconi, with enormous personalised posters and hollow slogans which seek to exploit the most conservative fears and reflexes of the public. He has recruited at great cost as director of his campaign a US 'expert' who was adviser to Gore during the US presidential elections of November 2000.

Berlusconi's major concern has been to re-establish an alliance with the Northern League of Umberto Bossi, forgetting the bloody insults that they hurled at each other for some years. A reconciliation was a primordial necessity in as much as Berlusconi's coalition had been beaten in 1996 precisely because of the fact that Bossi had pursued his own agenda. [\[1\]](#) This time Berlusconi has agreed to fall back in line - the evidence is that he is losing momentum and would, in isolation, risk a stinging defeat.

Lessons

The Berlusconi formation, Forza Italia, has drawn at least two other lessons from the defeat of 1996. Berlusconi himself had to note that he could not build a real party and still less govern on the basis essentially of the people who had helped him to build his economic empire.

He has tried to gain an anchorage in 'civil society' emphasising personalities who are supposed to represent it, like the mayor of Milan, Albertini, or the mayor of Bologna, Guazzaloca. The regional and municipal elections last year indicated that this approach had a certain success.

On the other hand, Berlusconi was concerned to gain an international image with the aim of putting an end to the mistrust felt towards him. He began by establishing privileged links with Spain's prime minister Aznar, whom he presented as an example to follow on the socio-economic front.

However, this was only a trampoline for a more ambitious operation, namely the acquisition of a recognised status at the level of the European Union. This he finally obtained through his integration in the European Popular Party. [2]

All the same, the mistrust seems to be still there, if one takes account of some recent articles in the Financial Times and the words of some ministers of EU countries (for example, a Belgian minister). Such attitudes are inspired notably by Berlusconi's links with Bossi, whose xenophobic tendencies are feared, and with the (far-right) National Alliance, which, in spite of its leader Fini's attempts to distance it from its past, still has fascist sympathisers in its ranks.

The misgivings of EU leaders also stem from other preoccupations, for example, concern that the drastic measures of tax reduction advocated by the centre-right might lead to budgetary disequilibria violating the parameters of the EMU stability pact.

It is interesting to note that the Italian employers, at least until now, have not explicitly backed the 'House of Liberties' despite the charm offensive of its leader. If they are increasingly critical towards the centre-left government (which they accuse of being subject to the pressures of the trade union federations, the CGIL above all, and having timorous attitudes, for example, in the area of 'freedom' of the labour market and on the question of pensions), the Italian employers have not forgotten either that the Berlusconi government, by defying the unions, provoked the most powerful mass mobilisation of the last two decades in autumn 1994. Moreover, big entrepreneurs, political officials and representative journalists have not hidden their disapproval of Berlusconi's electoral campaign, marked by an extreme demagogy and pseudo-populist declarations bordering on megalomania. [3]

In the final analysis, the question is posed as to whether the advent of Berlusconi in government could represent the emergence of a new political layer which can replace that which broke up at the beginning of the 1990s. We will return to this subject after the elections when an exhaustive balance sheet will be possible. For the instant we incline to reply in the negative.

A difficult fight for the PRC

In the context that we have summarily recalled, the Party of Communist Refoundation, despite all its weaknesses and contradictions, remains the sole formation which defends the political autonomy of the workers' movement by rejecting the socio-economic orientations of the dominant class and the politico-military enterprises of the imperialist

countries.

On the electoral level, it had no choice: there was no real basis, however small, for an agreement with the centre-left. Even on the more strictly tactical level, it was not possible to withdraw as in 1996. The electoral law, which the centre-left did not want to change, makes things very difficult for any formation outside of the two coalitions vying for government.

Nonetheless, to show responsibility and avoid being portrayed as responsible for the victory of Berlusconi, the PRC decided not to present candidates in the constituencies for the Chamber of Deputies which are elected on the basis of majority (first-past-the-post) vote, which leaves no room for independent parties: it has only put forward candidates for the proportional seats (25% of the total).

For the Senate (the second chamber, where the prerogatives are the same as that of the first, but whose mode of election is different, even if only 25% of senators are elected proportionally), it is standing everywhere. [\[4\]](#)

It should be added that, employing subterfuges going against the spirit of the law, the two supposedly opposed coalitions are trying to reduce the representation of the smaller parties.

It is therefore possible that the PRC will have fewer representatives elected than it would have obtained under a proportional system. Its main opportunity consists in leading a radical campaign, confirming that it will remain in all cases in opposition, and presenting itself as the sole anti-neo-liberal and anti-capitalist pole. It could thus regain ground, notably among those left layers who have in recent years tended to abstain and who would be tempted to maintain the same attitude on May 13.

[\[1\]](#) On the elections of 1996 see IV No.278, June 1996.

[\[2\]](#) The PPI, which is part of the centre-left governing coalition, also belongs to the European Popular Party group.

[\[3\]](#) Berlusconi proclaimed himself a worker prime minister, Italy's biggest entrepreneur, a peasant in his youth and a football maestro. He went on to say that a man of his breadth, as a big employer and politician, existed nowhere else in the world!

[\[4\]](#) Three comrades belonging to the Bandiera Rossa current aligned with the Fourth International are candidates to the Senate: Gigi Malabarba in Milan, Livio Maitan in Rome and Antonio Moscato in Pouilles.