

The "beautiful" vs. the "rich"

Italy's centre-left coalition chooses Francesco Rutelli as its leading candidate

Peter Schwarz
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Italy's governing "Olive Tree" alliance has nominated Francesco Rutelli as its leading candidate for the next parliamentary elections. Rutelli, who is mayor of Rome, was chosen at a convention held along American lines to contest the poll that will presumably take place in the coming spring.

Some 10,000 members of the eight parties comprising the alliance celebrated their new star last Saturday in Milan's festival hall by waving flags, unleashing balloons and stamping their feet. Rutelli thanked them in a speech that was as empty as it was clichéd. He swore to act with humility and seriousness, to be up-to-date without adapting to the moods of the present time, to preserve democratic sincerity and civil courage, tolerance and liberty, commitment to resolve problems, love of the fatherland and national pride... but did not utter a syllable about what he would do concretely as head of government. A program for the election and government will only be prepared after the convention.

The relatively young Rutelli (46) can already look back on a glittering political career, in the course of which he has changed his party political allegiance several times and distinguished himself by his political agility and adaptability.

The son of a well-known architect, he was expelled as a pupil from the Jesuit High School because he campaigned for women's rights. He broke off his architecture studies and became active in peace and environmentalist groups. In 1973 he joined the Radical Party, campaigned for the legalisation of abortion and homosexual rights and came to public notice through his aggressive attacks on the Vatican. He soon entered parliament as a Radical Party candidate.

At the end of the 1980s, he left the Radical Party and

joined the Greens and became Environment Minister in 1993. He resigned after a few days, in protest against the refusal of parliament to lift the immunity of the corrupt Socialist Party leader Bettino Craxi. He chose the right time to leave the sinking ship. Still in the Green Party, he continued his career, supported by a broad political alliance, as mayor of Rome. Then he became a moderate Christian Democrat. He left the Greens, joined the Democrats of Romano Prodi, reconciled himself with the Pope and even undertook a belated Catholic wedding ceremony.

Rutelli's greatest political capital is his appearance. His talent to always appear as a "bella figura," to look youthfully fresh and smile nicely for the cameras made him a star of all the talk shows. He gained the nickname "piaecone," someone everybody likes. He was also called "Clintonino" (little Clinton) for a while, or a "shining example of the post-Left". Starting with himself, the conviction slowly matured that he was the only one who could challenge Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of the right wing, who is also a master at dealing with the media. In mocking editorials the coming election campaign is already being described as a competition between the rich and the beautiful.

For the Olive Tree alliance and its main constituent the Left Democrats (who emerged from the Communist Party), Rutelli's nomination as their leading candidate is a declaration of political bankruptcy. He personifies superficiality and embodies the fact that they have nothing more to say politically.

If Rutelli wins the election next spring, which at present is not regarded as very probable, he would be the fourth head of government to come from Olive Tree since its establishment in 1995. The alliance was

brought into being by Romano Prodi, an economics professor, manager and former Christian Democrat, as a vehicle for his own political career. It includes eight parties, which are descended from various branches of the Christian Democrats on the right, to the Left Democrats and post-Stalinists on the left. The left wing is responsible for winning the support of the voters, while the right calls the political tune.

In 1996 the Olive Tree won the parliamentary election. Prodi became head of government and achieved what all his predecessors had tried in vain: he implemented the savings and cuts in the state budget that were necessary for Italy to qualify for membership of the European single currency, the euro. This strict austerity policy meant the Prodi government was engulfed by a crisis in 1998. When Massimo d'Alema took over as Prime Minister, Italy was lead for the first time by an ex-Stalinist. The Communist Party had taken 50 years in order to achieve this goal. But D'Alema needed less than two in order to lose it again. He continued Prodi's austerity measures and in spring 2000 his government's popularity reached an all-time low. D'Alema handed office to Giuliano Amato from the Socialist Party.

Since then all the opinion polls put opposition leader Silvio Berlusconi well in front. A media mogul and the richest man in Italy, Berlusconi was already head of government for some months in 1994. He had had to resign, however, after his planned pension cuts unleashed mass demonstrations and his rightwing coalition broke apart. In the meantime, he has succeeded in renewing the alliance with his partners at that time, the neo-fascist National Alliance of Gianfranco Fini and Umberto Bossi's separatist Northern League.

Rutelli's appointment as leading candidate for the Olive Tree is a panic reaction to a likely election victory for Berlusconi. Unable to oppose the content of the right wing's programme and offer one that meets with the needs of the masses, the Olive Tree is seeking to beat Berlusconi on his own territory—through bluff, illusions and media manipulation. Rutelli has flown in one of Democratic Party Presidential candidate Al Gore's advisors from the USA especially for this purpose.

Naturally this is justified by claims that elections cannot be won today in any other way, due to the

dominating role of the media. In reality, the opposite is the case. Because the parties hardly differ politically from one another and uniformly represent the interests of the economic elite, such external features decide the result of the elections.



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