

Italian elections set for May 13

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21 March 2001

Italian voters will be subjected to intensive electioneering over the next eight weeks. On March 8, President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi dissolved the Italian parliament. New elections are to be held on May 13. On the same day, local authorities will be voted into office in 1,300 municipalities, including the major cities of Rome, Milan, Naples and Turin.

The election is already promising to be a turning point in Italian politics. The right-wing alliance headed by media czar Silvio Berlusconi is currently far ahead in the opinion polls. If the right-wing parties win the election, the incumbent centre-left “Olive Tree” alliance will face disintegration five years after its first-ever election victory. But the outcome has yet to be decided. Many voters are either still undecided or reluctant to cast their votes at all. An abstention rate of 30 percent is being predicted—a record for Italy.

Under the current voting procedure, three quarters of the parliamentary seats are allocated according to a winner-take-all principle. As a result, smaller parties fending for themselves have virtually no chance, and most of the parties are grouping themselves into two main camps: a right-wing alliance and one to the left of centre. The right-wing grouping consists of Berlusconi's Forza Italia, Gianfranco Fini's National Alliance (stemming from the fascist MSI), Umberto Bossi's separatist Northern League, and two smaller Christian Democratic parties.

The left of centre alliance consists of nine new parties in all. Its backbone is formed by the Democratic Left (DS), the successor of the Communist Party. Also finding a home in the alliance are three Christian Democratic groups—the People's Party (PPI), the Democrats, and the Union of Democrats for Europe—as well as the Greens, the Social Democrats (SDI), two liberal parties and the Refounded Communists (PdCI).

In 1994 Berlusconi formed a government in coalition with neo-fascists and separatists. At the time, the floundering of the old party system in a morass of corruption scandals opened the way to power for his newly established movement. But his government held together for only a few months. The immediate cause of its collapse was the withdrawal of the Northern League. However, the real reason was to be found in the strikes and mass demonstrations in the autumn of 1994, when millions of workers reacted against Berlusconi's attempt to reduce pensions.

After a series of transition governments, the centre-left

“Olive Tree” alliance narrowly won the parliamentary election in April 1996. Members of the former Communist Party were thereby able to assume ministerial positions for the first time since the immediate post-war period.

The right wing fell into crisis. Berlusconi was forced to defend himself against corruption charges in numerous court cases. The Northern League engaged in bizarre attempts to found a northern Italian state by the name of Padania and—when this failed—concentrated on racist and xenophobic campaigns modelled on those of Jörg Haider, leader of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). The National Alliance was able to consolidate its influence only in the south.

If Berlusconi has succeeded in once again welding together his fragile right-wing alliance, and stands a good chance of winning the election, he owes his good fortune first and foremost to the “Olive Tree” and the Democratic Left, who have systematically alienated their own voters by pursuing policies that favour the business community.

They consider their greatest achievement to have been the consolidation of the national budget that made possible Italy's admission into the European currency union. Under the “Olive Tree” alliance numerous large-scale state enterprises have been privatised and spheres of monopoly opened up to competition. Both these feats were achieved at the expense of workers and the socially disadvantaged.

The unemployment rate has fallen to its lowest level since 1993, owing to liberalising measures and the introduction of flexible working conditions. But the national average is still 10 percent, and over 20 percent in the south.

In five years, altogether four governments and three heads of government provided by “Olive Tree” have come and gone. Romano Prodi—an economics expert from Christian Democratic circles—had to give up his post after two-and-a-half years, when his draft budget was rejected in parliament because of opposition from the Refounded Communists. This group—a breakaway section of the former Communist Party—had supported Prodi till then, although it was not a member of the governing coalition.

Then the Democratic Left—in the person of Massimo D'Alema—claimed the post of head of government for the first time. To achieve this, they enlisted the support of a section of the Christian Democrats. However, the D'Alema government proved to be far more unstable than the government under

Prodi. After only a few months it resigned for the first time, reformed, and finally threw in the towel in January 2000.

Next Giuliano D'Amato took over the reins of government. D'Amato is a social democrat from the same circles as Bettino Craxi, the former government leader condemned for corruption. Craxi—who has since died in exile in Tunisia—was the sponsor of Berlusconi, who earned his first millions as a real estate agent in Milan under Craxi's guiding hand.

For some time the “Olive Tree” has been showing clear signs of decay. D'Amato and two of his ministers have announced their retirement from politics in view of the expected victory of the right. They will not be seeking candidacy in the elections.

The leading candidate for the “Olive Tree” is a man whose only political qualification is his ability to match Berlusconi in front of television cameras: Francesco Rutelli, the mayor of Rome. Rutelli's political history has been extremely turbulent. He began his career with the Radicals, a middle-class party whose radicalism confines itself to sexual morality; on all other issues it stands more to the right. Then he changed over to the Greens, representing them in city hall, and finally—together with Prodi—he founded the Democrats, the party to which he presently belongs.

For some days now, Rutelli has been campaigning by travelling around the country in a special train. However, it is unclear what he stands for since he does not intend to publish his election programme until mid-April.

A right-wing victory in the election would constitute a significant move to the right on the part of the political establishment as a whole. Berlusconi himself is considered to be the richest man in Italy. Like media magnates Rupert Murdoch and Leo Kirch, he has at his disposal a media empire that he uses for his own political purposes. His television channel combines right-wing propaganda with entertainment of the lowest level. If such media power were to be fused with the political power of the head of government and concentrated in the hands of one person, all claims to democracy would be utterly hollow.

Numerous old fascist cadres with roots reaching back to Mussolini are to be found in the National Alliance, Berlusconi's most important ally. Under Fini's leadership, the party has striven to make a respectable impression, but this cannot conceal the fact that there are still strong fascist elements within its ranks.

On the other hand, the Northern League appears quite openly in public with its racist and xenophobic campaigns. This has already led to international disputes since Louis Michel (the Belgian foreign minister) publicly designated Northern League head Bossi a fascist who is just as dangerous as Jörg Haider and Belgium's right-wing extremist, Vlaams Blok. This brought strident protests from Italian politicians.

An electoral victory for the Italian right would have dramatic consequences for the whole of Europe. It would be interpreted as the end of the social democratic era, which climaxed with

the coming to power of Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, Lionel Jospin in France and Gerhard Schröder in Germany. Berlusconi is already being eagerly courted by European conservatives. Forza Italia is a member of the European People's Party in the European parliament. Helmut Kohl, the former chancellor of Germany, personally helped Berlusconi's party—despite resistance from many European Christian Democratic parties—to gain entrance into the conservative faction.

In the meantime, Social Democratic representatives in the European parliament have accused conservative members of trying to delay proceedings on an application for abolishing Berlusconi's right to parliamentary immunity. Baltasar Garzon, the Spanish examining magistrate, who is currently investigating possible embezzlement and tax evasion on the part of Berlusconi during his acquisition of a Spanish television channel, made this application some months ago, but the matter has not yet been acted upon.

Regardless of who wins the election on May 13, it is bound to usher in a new period of instability. During the recent legislative period, 200 of the 630 members of the Italian parliament changed their party affiliation. At the moment, both camps are extremely unsettled. Irreconcilable differences exist between the Northern League and the National Alliance, Berlusconi's two allies. While the League advocates a far-reaching federalisation of the country, the Alliance defends the centralised nation state. The League has its electoral basis in the relatively prosperous north, the Alliance in the poor south.

At least one fact can be observed from the past five years: in no way is the “Olive Tree” a viable or progressive alternative to a right-wing alliance. Even if—contrary to expectations—it did manage to win the election on May 13, that would only pave the way for the far-right's ascent to power in the future. A real alternative to such a scenario can only emerge from an independent political movement of the working class based on a genuine socialist and internationalist program.



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