

Italy: Berlusconi fans an atmosphere of intimidation

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At the centre of the forthcoming Italian elections is the issue of freedom of the press and who controls the media. The reaction of media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, the leading candidate of the right-wing alliance “House of Freedom”, to critical reports by those sections of the media not under his influence has been to lash out indiscriminately and create an atmosphere of intimidation.

Two weeks ago an intense debate took place over the programme “Satyricon” broadcast by the public TV station RAI. The programme reviewed the book *The Smell of Money*, which throws some light on Berlusconi's past. Berlusconi's reaction was to demand that the presenter and the entire leadership of RAI resign, and to announce his intention of boycotting the public broadcasting station. He began to systematically buy up copies of the disputed book, leading to an unforeseen rise in circulation. Up to now 220,000 copies have been published. Initially only 5,000 were planned.

The accusations raised in the book are not new. Some years ago a number of books, newspaper articles, case files and an Italian bank document emerged that described in detail Berlusconi's rise from a small building contractor to the richest man in Italy. They strongly suggested that Berlusconi's ascent took place under shady circumstances. At the moment five different legal proceedings against Berlusconi are under way—two for falsified balance sheets, two for the corruption of judges and one for fraud.

In spite of this, Berlusconi's threats against RAI were successful. The public broadcasting station has temporarily stopped transmitting all political radio and TV programmes and has banned politicians from appearing on its programmes, except on newsreels. As a result, the three broadcasting stations owned by

Berlusconi have a de facto political monopoly.

Meanwhile, the responsible parliamentary commission has presented a new legal arrangement for election programmes. It applies to both public and private broadcasting stations and prohibits any kind of commercial electoral advertising. The appearance of politicians is allowed only on political programmes, while no party is to be given preferential treatment. The public broadcasting stations are also required to grant all parties two election spots a day in which they can explain their points of view.

This has provoked new cries of indignation from Berlusconi's election team, which has a large campaign war chest at its disposal. The media tycoon grumbled that the parliamentary plan was an attempt by the ruling coalition to silence his right-wing opposition because he is ahead in the polls. He went on to claim that public television was merely a tool of the left to throw dirt on its political enemies.

Berlusconi stands the facts on their heads. The new legal agreement grants him access to the public media, while it will not be difficult for him to use his private television stations to serve his own interests. An analysis of the newsreels shown on the television stations owned by Berlusconi has revealed that Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia, takes up 54 percent of the total broadcasting time.

Berlusconi is also targeting the print media for attack. The most recent subject of an attack by the right-wing candidate, who owns the publishing house Mandadori and several daily and weekly papers, is the journalist Indro Montanelli, who is widely respected despite his conservative leanings and the fact that he is more than 90 years old. In an interview he declared that in the coming elections he would vote for the centre-left “Olive Tree” alliance—for which he was viciously

denounced. Berlusconi called Montanelli a notorious liar and Berlusconi's allies insulted the journalist in a similar manner. Montanelli received anonymous phone calls and threatening letters.

Montanelli defended himself by accusing Berlusconi of disregarding the freedom of the press and reporting the experiences he himself had made in 1994. At that time he was editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Giornale*, which he had founded but had by then become part of Berlusconi's media empire. During the election of that year Berlusconi phoned him daily to supply him with political directives. Montanelli explained that this was the reason he resigned his post.

The attacks by Berlusconi against Montanelli have been so fierce that even the largest Italian newspaper, *Corriere della sera*, has felt obliged to comment. It complained that Berlusconi's "violent speech" and tone were "not fit for a civilised country".

The judicial system is also being targeted by Berlusconi. He has for several years been denouncing public prosecutors who have examined his financial conduct, but of late he has also begun to attack the constitutional court, accusing it of being prejudiced. The minister of justice, Piero Fassino, commented: "Yesterday he denounced the judicial system as the red cavalry, today he claims that the constitutional court is under the control of the left. One can only hope that he won't declare tomorrow that the parliament is too dangerous."

Berlusconi's aggressive behaviour shows what can be expected if he should win the election. Together with his allies, the neo-fascist National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale) and the openly racist Northern League (Lega Nord), he would concentrate in his hands a degree of political and media power unique in Europe, making a mockery of any claim to democracy.

Berlusconi's Fininvest controls the TV holding Mediaset, owning about 50 percent of the shares, worth 8 billion euros. Last year alone Mediaset was able to increase its profit by 25 percent, to a total of 400 million euros, while the profit generated by advertisements went up 12 percent, reaching 2.36 billion euros. The three TV stations controlled by Mediaset—Italia 1, Rete Quattro and Tele 5—have ratings of 43 percent.

An election victory by Berlusconi would further boost Mediaset's balance sheets. Berlusconi has already

made clear that if he wins he will not withdraw from his commercial activities. He would be able to directly control the public television station RAI while preventing any unwanted competition emerging from the private sector. Italian Telecom previously attempted without success to acquire a licence, and would hardly have any more success if Berlusconi were in power.

Except for moral pleas and appeals to Berlusconi to adhere to democratic rules, the centre-left coalition has nothing with which to oppose him. Although it proposed a law to separate political from media power in the last election, it failed to pass any such law in its five years in office. Instead, Berlusconi was able to enlarge his empire.

The helplessness of the "Olive tree" in the face of Berlusconi's provocations results from the fact that it also proposes a programme opposed to the social interests of the masses and hardly differs from that of the right wing.

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