

Italy's Berlusconi and his "House of Freedoms"—a new dimension in the development of the right wing in Europe

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The rise to prominence of Silvio Berlusconi's "House of Freedoms" represents a new dimension in the development of the right wing in Europe. Should Berlusconi's political formation win the elections in Italy due on May 13, as is currently expected, its victory would fundamentally change the face of Europe as a whole.

The "House of Freedoms" has little in common with the types of conservative and Christian democratic parties which left their mark on decades of post-war European politics. Under a Berlusconi government there would be little left in Italy of what is normally understood as democracy.

Forza Italia

Forza Italia, the strongest organisation in the Berlusconi alliance, is more a commercial enterprise than political party. It is entirely tailored to the personality of Berlusconi, who founded the organisation in 1994 and since then has personally led and dominated it in his own authoritarian manner.

It has been structured on the model of an Italian football club—a number of which are notorious for their racism and anti-Semitism. The organisation has no local groups, congresses or even a programme, but instead consists of so-called "clubs" which sell flags, jacket buttons, ties and portraits of the guru Berlusconi set against a background of colours drawn from Italy's national flag. Even the name Forza Italia ("Forward Italy!—the battle cry of Italian fans of the national team) comes from the world of football where Berlusconi plays an important role as the owner of the AC Milan club.

Forza Italia is said to have 300,000 subscribed members who pay an annual fee equivalent to 100 German marks (more than for any other Italian political party). In terms of the political life of the organisation, the membership are powerless. Political slogans, the public image and activity of Forza Italia are determined by experts drawn directly from advertising agencies which themselves are part of Berlusconi's own commercial empire.

A recent article in the Swiss *Tagesanzeiger*s described the way in which Forza Italia selected its election candidates: "For the selection of candidates—for example, provincial and regional elections—Berlusconi hires head-hunters and advisors from big companies who check the candidates according to a criteria of productivity. Selection is made of those who are good sellers. Previous political activity is not necessary. Then the selected person is presented to the 10 coordinators of Forza Italia, who check his or her political suitability. This stage is passed by those who promise their loyalty. In interviews candidates with beards or glasses are at a disadvantage. The chief [Berlusconi] apparently does not approve of such things.

"Once one belongs, work begins at the centre in the Rome party headquarters inhabited by opinion pollsters and marketing strategists. On

the basis of opinion polls they determine election themes and give the candidates the appropriate look. This can vary from region to region. Whoever impresses, i.e., distributes the most party literature amongst the people and wins even more votes, can reckon with rewards. At the last regional elections study trips to Berlin or Madrid were organised for allied parties. Or a season ticket for the home games of AC Milan. The best of them can spend a day at Cavaliere in his [Berlusconi's] villa near Milan."

A cult of personality is conducted around the figure of Berlusconi recalling the practices of totalitarian regimes. He regards himself as unique. Last summer he commented: "There is no one on the international scene who can presume to measure up to me. My greatness is unquestionable, my humanity, my history—others can only dream of such."

All posters in the current campaign are required to carry his picture—even when the posters are used to promote local candidates—and one of the main election activities of Forza Italia is the distribution of a Berlusconi biography which, with an initial print run of 12 million, is being sent free of charge to every Italian household.

In the 128 pages of the book it is possible to find no less than 126 such pictures of the book's hero. It is titled "An Italian Story" and describes in poignant style the rise of the pleasant and industrious Silvio to successful businessman—an Italian version of the American dream of the rise from dishwasher to millionaire. Berlusconi intones: "As the son of a bank clerk I was required to work and work and work. My mother told me 'It is a tough fate for you, nothing is easy for you, you must conquer everything with enormous effort, with great sacrifice.' And I answered: 'It is true, mama, that's the way it is: always blood, sweat and tears!'"

Berlusconi "freedoms"

This mixture of soap opera, professional advertising and shrill demagoguery is used to communicate the message that all that remains in Italy in the way of social protection and a tradition of reconciliation of diverse social interests is to be radically done away with.

According to Berlusconi's view of things, anyone who questions the unrestricted domination of the free market or dares to critically examine his own business practices is "a communist". He poses as the heroic defender of free enterprise besieged by "red" judges and communist apparachiks. The extent of demagoguery, empty accusations, slanders, lies and provocations levelled by Berlusconi at his political opponents exceeds anything one has come to expect in normal elections. In his onslaughts he does not stop at his immediate political rivals. The state president, parliament and the judiciary are also regarded as fair game.

In fact he has a very unconventional interpretation of the "freedoms" incorporated into the name of his election alliance.

For years Berlusconi has been in conflict with the judiciary in connection with his business practices. The following picture has emerged

from the numerous files compiled against Berlusconi in the course of past and current judicial investigations. *Die Zeit* from April 26 writes: "Berlusconi is guilty of perjury, he has bribed finance officials; he paid bribe money and withheld taxes. But up until now he was always able to get away with it."

Upon first taking over the post of prime minister in 1994, Berlusconi sought to pass an amnesty for corruption offences. His plan collapsed in the face of broad public opposition and the short period in office of his government. Now he is seeking to change the constitution and put an end to the independent status of the Italian judiciary.

He is especially concerned by the constitutional article which limits the liberty of private enterprise with a postscript stipulating "as far as is possible within existing law". He regards this as "Soviet inspired" and intends to do away with it. The judiciary is to receive a list of priorities on an annual basis from parliament stipulating which offences are to be prosecuted. Obviously offences such as corruption and business malpractices will figure at the very bottom of such lists.

Berlusconi refrains from making any other concrete election predictions. He draws his election slogans from the latest opinion polls and generally promises everything to everyone.

A central theme in his election programme is tax reduction: "Less taxes for everyone" is one of the slogans he has put forward across the country. In particular taxes are to be drastically reduced for employers and inheritance tax done away with. At the same time Berlusconi promises to end all deductions for incomes under the Italian equivalent of 22,000 German marks and a minimum pension of 1,000 marks. How he plans to finance such measures remains a mystery.

Berlusconi's authoritarian behaviour, his near megalomaniac self-confidence, his intertwining of private and political interests and his total disregard for the traditional division of powers and the judiciary undoubtedly represent a new attack on traditional forms of democracy. An even bigger danger, however, emerges from the unparalleled media and economic power which would be concentrated in the person of Berlusconi as head of government.

Berlusconi owns Italy's three biggest television channels. The three Italian state-owned television channels are indirectly controlled by the government. Should he win the election then six of the seven Italian TV channels with an audience of over 90 percent of the total would then be directly or indirectly in his hands.

In addition, the publishing houses Elemond, Einaudi, Sperling & Kupfer and Mondadori are all part of the Berlusconi media giant Fininvest. Via Mondadori Berlusconi controls the Italian news magazine with the biggest circulation, *Panorama*. Fininvest, which has an estimated total value of between 55 and 60 billion German marks, also owns chains of department stores, business concerns, film production companies, the football club AC Milan and various hockey, volleyball and rugby clubs as well as the Internet provider Jumpy.

The course of the election campaign up until now has made clear that Berlusconi is prepared to utilise his enormous influence in a thoroughly ruthless manner.

Berlusconi's alliance partners

Berlusconi's most important partners in his crusade for "freedom" are the neo-fascist National Alliance and the separatist Northern League.

At the start of the '90s the National Alliance emerged from the MSI, a party which for decades stood in the tradition of fascist leader Benito Mussolini. Under its present leader Gianfranco Fini, the NA has sought to distance itself from its fascist past and present itself as a conservative, nationally oriented party. To this end Fini made a visit to the Holocaust memorial in Auschwitz and has for years sought to be officially received in Israel. Nevertheless the old cadre of the MSI are still prominent in setting the tone for the party.

The NA's apparent settling of accounts with the past is not as clear as it

is publicly presented. The "House of Freedoms" has had electoral discussions with Pino Rauti, who refused to cooperate in the transformation of the MSI into the NA and went on to form his own openly fascist splinter party. Rauti's fascists are assured of a parliamentary seat via the electoral list of Berlusconi and are entitled to electoral campaign finances and other state subsidies while, for his part, Rauti calls for a vote for the "House of Freedoms".

The Northern League emerged as a melting pot in Italy's prosperous North for all those elements dissatisfied with high taxes, government bureaucracy in Rome and the subsidies made to Italy's poorer southern region. Following a slump in the party's fortunes in connection with its call for an independent state of Padua, the party has concentrated on xenophobic policies.

In this connection the party has been prepared to go as far as organising pogrom-type campaigns. It has organised sit-down strikes and protest marches against the building of mosques and has been supported in its actions by conservative sections of the Catholic Church, who demand that only Catholics be allowed to immigrate to Italy, but not Muslims. Following the murder of two persons in Lodi, a town to the south of Milan, the League responded by organising a torch-lit protest march against "foreign crime". Afterwards it was established that in fact the murders had been carried out by two Italian youth.

At a local level the League and the National Alliance work closely together with Nazi groups. The city council of Verona, a stronghold of the League, has supported Nazi concerts, lectures on the "Auschwitz lie" and a presentation of books by Nazi publishers. Verona also made headlines because the fans of the local football club shouted down African players of rival clubs on a regular basis. According to the president of the Verona football club, the team does not dare to employ black players because of the negative response of the fans.

Playing a more subsidiary role in the "House of Freedoms" are Italy's two Christian democratic parties—the CCD and CDU. The latter is led by Rocco Buttiglione, who maintains close relations with the Vatican and Germany's CDU (Christian Democratic Union). Just recently the Italian Socialist Party led by Bobo Craxi and former foreign minister Gianni de Michelis joined the Berlusconi block. The collaboration between the socialists and the right wing is in no way coincidental—Bobo's father, Bettino Craxi, a former chairman of the Socialist Party and prime minister convicted for corruption, is regarded as the real string-puller and background supporter of Berlusconi. Berlusconi established the basis for his wealth in the '70s as a property speculator in socialist dominated Milan.

Consequences for Europe

European governments, supported by many conservative and Christian Democratic parties, reacted to the recent coming to power of the extreme right-wing Freedom Party in Austria with sanctions. Now many of the same conservative parties take a thoroughly benevolent view of Berlusconi's rise to prominence.

In particular the German conservative CDU and CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) have given the Berlusconi block enormous support in terms of election aid. In 1999 Forza Italia was accepted into the fraction of European peoples' parties in the EU parliament at the insistence of former German chancellor Helmut Kohl. Since then Forza Italia has been regarded as a sister party of the Christian Democrats, receiving advice from the Konrad Adenauer foundation, which has close links to the CDU. Leading CDU politicians have spoken at election meetings for Berlusconi's party. In the middle of March, Karl Lammer, the European expert of the CDU, spoke at a mass meeting in Rome which German Christian Democrats proudly claimed only came about through the assistance of the Konrad Adenauer foundation.

European conservative and Christian Democratic parties look upon the forthcoming elections in Italy as a crucial milestone—should the domino of

Italy fall to the right, then conservatives across Europe see the possibility of taking power in the majority of other European countries where social democratic parties have governed since the middle of the '90s. After 10 years in office most of the social democratic parties find themselves in a deep crisis. The traditional base for their politics was rocked by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequences of globalisation. The opening up of national markets to global competition has had profound consequences for the base of these parties—the middle class. At the same time the decline of the Soviet Union stripped the right wing of their most effective ideological weapon—anticommunism.

This crisis is most apparent in Italy where hardly anything remains of the Democrazia Christiana, the party which dominated Italian politics for nearly 50 years. In France the Gaullists and liberals are in a permanent state of war marked by scandals, bitter faction struggles and splits. At the last elections in Great Britain the Tory party, deeply split over the question of Europe, suffered a devastating defeat. Since the exit of Helmut Kohl, the conservatives in Germany have also been weakened by internal factional struggles.

Numerous ultra-right parties have attempted to fill the political gap left behind by the conservatives, on occasion with considerable success. However these parties have also proven to be highly unstable. The French National Front has broken apart and the Austrian Freedom Party is riven by bitter factional struggles. At the same time the Freedom Party has been shunned and excluded by the traditional bourgeois right wing.

Now, for the first time, Berlusconi has been able to unite the most important sections of the economy and the media—which he owns as the richest man in Italy—with parts of the old political establishment and the most significant ultra-right organisations.

His main political orientation is very different from that of the traditional Christian democratic right. In place of the conservative, often Catholic-oriented standpoint on the family and society, Berlusconi pursues aggressive nationalism and racism—promoting a ruthless form of economic liberalism instead of state intervention in the economy and traditional lobby politics.

He is perhaps closest to Margaret Thatcher, the conservative British prime minister of Great Britain in the '80s, a person he profoundly admires. The difference, however, is that Thatcher relied on the traditional Tory party to realise her program, whereas Berlusconi has entered into a public alliance with fascists and racists. Should he be successful at the forthcoming elections on May 14, this would undoubtedly strengthen right-wing tendencies within the European Christian Democrats—such as the faction of Roland Koch in the German CDU—who are attempting to implement policies similar to those of Berlusconi.

Berlusconi's success

There is much speculation about the secret of Berlusconi's success. While there is no doubt that his domination of the media, his control of branches of advertising, his virtually inexhaustible financial means, all play a role—nevertheless in the final analysis the phenomenon of Berlusconi has political roots.

The most decisive factor here is the crisis of the workers movement. Traditional workers organisations—in Italy the Communist Party and the trade unions—moved more and more to the right over the past two decades and have ceased to defend even the most elementary social gains and democratic rights.

In 1994 when Berlusconi first became head of government in the wake of a series of corruption affairs which shook the political system, his attacks on pensions led to massive protests. His governing coalition broke apart and following a series of transitional governments the “Olive Tree” alliance, strongly backed by the Italian Communist Party, took power at national elections in 1996.

After five years in power the centre-left Olive Tree government has been so discredited that there now exists the real possibility of Berlusconi

returning to power. In his drive for power he relies less on broad public support and more on widespread political passivity, as well as the alienation of broad layers of the population from official politics.

This development has been reflected in demographic investigations. The renowned Ispo Institute has established that just 15 percent of Italians have a positive outlook regarding politics and politicians. Fifty percent express “disgust”, “mistrust” or “anger”; 25 percent “indifference” and “boredom”.

Italy, where formerly the established political parties counted their membership in the millions, has become one of the most de-politicised countries in Western Europe. Election abstention and voter protest have grown enormously. At the last elections non-voters were in the majority.

Berlusconi's crude and reactionary methods have proved to be successful precisely in this political vacuum. A revival of the workers movement would quickly reveal that Berlusconi is an emperor without clothes. However such an offensive can be ruled out from the various organisations comprising the Olive Tree alliance. Even if the alliance were able to win the election, it would only open the way further for the emergence of the right wing.

The political answer to Berlusconi and the political danger he represents requires the building of a new party in the Italian working class on socialist foundations.

See Also:

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[7 April 2001]

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