

Berlusconi wins parliamentary vote

Right-wing media mogul set to head new Italian government

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Tensely awaited parliamentary elections in Italy have ended with a victory for media boss Silvio Berlusconi and his alliance of right-wing parties assembled under the banner “House of Freedoms”. Even as the initial, still indecisive results were being reported Sunday evening, Berlusconi declared himself the winner. His election manager warned, “If they do not declare us the winners, we will take to the streets in our millions.”

Early press dispatches on Sunday reported a landslide victory for the right-wing alliance, but as the night wore on Berlusconi's lead shrank dramatically. For most of Monday the race between the Berlusconi-led alliance and the ruling centre-left alliance headed by Francesco Rutelli—known as the “Olive-Tree”—remained close. Only on Monday evening was it clear that Berlusconi had the necessary majorities in both chambers of the Italian parliament—the House of Deputies and the Senate—to form a government.

With nearly all the votes counted, Berlusconi had amassed almost 45 percent of votes cast for the House of Deputies and more than 42 percent for the Senate. Due to the complicated Italian election system, the exact division of seats in the two chambers was still not clear Monday evening. According to some press reports, which remain to be confirmed, Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* party had won more than 250 direct mandates in the House of Deputies against 160 seats for the Olive-Tree alliance.

Compared with the results in the last national election, held in 1996, *Forza Italia* increased its vote by 9 percent nationally (from 20.6 percent to over 29 percent). In a press statement *Forza Italia* declared itself to be “far and away the most powerful party” in Italy.

Berlusconi's largest ally, the neo-fascist National Alliance, which has its origins in Italy's post-war fascist MSI, lost some 4 percent, sliding to 12 percent of the national vote. The main loser in the Berlusconi-led alliance of parties was the separatist Northern League, whose leader Umberto Bossi conducted an aggressively xenophobic and racist campaign—if anything, more extreme in its anti-immigrant rhetoric than the demagoguery of Austria's far-right leader Jörg Haider.

The Northern League, according to some reports, failed to reach the threshold of 4 percent of the vote necessary under Italian electoral law for party representation in parliament. The organisation was, however, able to win some direct mandates.

In the camp of the centre left, the Left Democrats, which

emerged in the 1990s as the new face of Italy's Communist Party, was the biggest loser. The party captured less than 17 percent of the vote, compared with 21.2 percent in 1996.

The election victory of Berlusconi's right-wing alliance represents a renewed shift to the right in Italian politics and has major consequences for coming developments in Europe. Berlusconi, who names Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher as his political idols, combines pro-business, “free market” policies with vague rhetoric about reform of the Italian economy and state. He advocates a substantial cut in taxes combined with privatisation of state-run enterprises and private inroads into state-run social welfare programs. Throughout the campaign Berlusconi sought to deflect criticisms of his vast wealth and shady business practices by declaring all such accusations to be “communist” propaganda.

Berlusconi, who owns three of Italy's most influential television channels as well as the country's biggest construction and property concerns, is the wealthiest man in Italy, with a fortune of \$13 billion. He is also widely considered to be one of the most corrupt politicians in all of Europe. He first won power in 1994 but was forced to resign as prime minister after only seven months when it became clear that he was using his governmental power to further his own entrepreneurial aims.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, over a dozen separate investigations and criminal proceedings have been undertaken against Berlusconi. The spectrum of claims and accusations against him extends from perjury, falsifying financial records, tax offences and bribery to collaboration with the Mafia. To date he has been found guilty on no less than four occasions and sentenced to a total of six years and three months in prison. Following a succession of appeals, however, the sentences were lifted.

In the Sicilian capital of Palermo, Berlusconi's right-hand man, the former head of his Fininvest-concern *Pubitalia*, is presently in court facing charges of Mafia connections.

Prior to the election, the conservative British magazine *Economist* proclaimed on its front cover that Berlusconi was unfit to rule. It declared, “In any self-respecting democracy it would be unthinkable that the man assumed to be on the verge of being elected prime minister would recently have come under investigation for, among other things, money-laundering, complicity in murder, connections with the Mafia, tax evasion and the bribing of politicians, judges and the tax police. But the

country is Italy and the man is Silvio Berlusconi, almost certainly its richest citizen. As our own investigations make plain, Mr. Berlusconi is not fit to lead the government of any country, least of all one of the world's richest democracies."

The article concluded, "the election of Mr. Berlusconi as prime minister would mark a dark day for Italian democracy and the rule of law."

That a man who, according to the Italian weekly *L'Espresso*, deserves to spend more than 10 years in jail has been able to gain power a second time testifies above all to the political bankruptcy of the centre-left government that took power five years ago. From the very start, this government regarded as its main task the imposition of the economic measures demanded by the international banks as the precondition for the integration of the Italian lira into the European Union's euro currency.

Major cuts were made in social welfare programs under the Left Democrat-led government, and the interests of the broad masses of the population were treated with contempt. Unemployment remained at chronically high levels. After the government abolished Italy's long-standing policy of adjusting wages to compensate for rising prices, the gulf between the industrial north and the impoverished south deepened as never before.

On a number of occasions the centre-left government was in a position to go on an offensive against Berlusconi and his *Forza Italia*. But, fearing a movement of the broad masses, the Olive-Tree alliance always sought to keep open the option of collaboration with Berlusconi in the form of a government of national unity.

Several days before the election, the well-known Italian dramatist, director and Nobel Prize winner Dario Fo drew attention to this aspect of the role of the Olive-Tree government. Under the title "Is the Left Also Guilty?" he said of an election victory for Berlusconi:

"What strikes me as foul in the whole story is the responsibility of the centre-left government. In a thoroughly slavish manner, the left kept Berlusconi in the game, because they believed this was the best way to improve their prospects with undecided centre parties. This is the only reason that things have advanced as far as they have."

The choice of Francesco Rutelli, the former mayor of Rome, to lead the Olive-Tree alliance was tantamount to a capitulation before Berlusconi. Rutelli, who had transferred from the Greens to the Democratic Party in order to forward his political career, made a point of avoiding any serious confrontation with the media mogul.

Only on the eve of the vote did the two alliances produce programmatic documents, which underscored the lack of sharp differences between the two on basic economic and social questions. The centre-left adapted itself to Berlusconi's right-wing program, echoing his call for cuts in the highest tax rates and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises.

The campaign was dominated by mudslinging between the two camps, arousing disgust within large sections of the electorate. As a result, electoral research institutes predicted a low voter turnout. The demoralisation of the centre-left government and its fear of any independent movement of the population was expressed in the

decision of the Interior Ministry, supposedly on economic grounds, to close a third of the polling stations.

To the surprise of both politicians and pollsters, nearly 81.5 percent of those entitled to vote—far more than anticipated—went to the polls on Sunday. The larger than expected turnout, combined with the closure of polling places, resulted in huge lines, long waits and outright chaos in many parts of the country.

After standing in line for hours, many frustrated voters ripped up their voting cards in disgust. In numerous locations it proved impossible to close the polling stations at the designated time of 10 p.m. In Rome, the final votes were cast at 2:15 a.m. In Calabria people were voting until 4 a.m.

In Naples, where unemployment levels are among the highest in Italy, hundreds of angry voters, frustrated by hours of waiting, stormed a polling station and destroyed the ballots.

Amongst the first to congratulate Berlusconi was the right-wing government in Austria. Sending greetings, Vienna called upon the European Union (EU) to accept the result and refrain from imposing sanctions, as it did against Austria following the election victory of the alliance of the Austrian Liberal Party and Haider's Freedom Party.

Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique said he hoped the result would lead to the creation of a stable government. The Bavarian-based Christian Social Union (CSU) declared: "Socialist dominance in Europe is crumbling." The chairman of the CSU in the German parliament, Michael Glos, commented: "Following the victory of Bush in the US, this is a further encouraging signal for the conservative camp in the EU."

The German government refused to make an initial comment, saying the final result was still not clear. French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine said that European governments would be keeping a close eye on the new Italian government.



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