

Italy: Berlusconi to name "post-fascist" Fini as deputy prime minister

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Final results in the Italian election make clear that House of Freedoms, the coalition of right-wing parties headed by Silvio Berlusconi, has comfortable majorities in both houses of the Italian parliament. *Casa delle Libertà* has won 386 seats of the 630 seats in Italy's lower house (Chamber of Deputies) and 177 seats out of 315 in the Senate.

The vote has highly polarised the country in both geographical and social terms. Voting for the Berlusconi alliance was particularly heavy in Italy's less developed south and among social layers such as marketing and sales people, businessmen, housewives and the unemployed. The opposition Olive Tree alliance was able to maintain electoral support in large industrialised areas in the centre of Italy and gained support especially from academics, teachers and professional workers.

In the north of the country, Berlusconi's own organisation *Forza Italia* was able to profit from the slump in the fortunes of Umberto Bossi's Northern League, which failed to win enough votes to reach the four percent threshold required, according to Italian electoral law, for national representation in parliament. Press reports speculate that Berlusconi could use his increased strength in the alliance to exclude Bossi's party from a significant role in the government. Bossi's withdrawal from the previous Berlusconi-led coalition in 1994 led to the collapse of that government.

Groups traditionally associated with the Olive Tree lost heavily in last week's vote. The Left Democrats (formerly the Italian Communist Party) recorded its lowest vote (16 percent) since its foundation, and its leader, Walter Veltroni, promptly announced his resignation. Another casualty was the split-off from the Italian Communist Party—the Communist Refoundation—whose support slumped from 8.6 percent

in 1996 to barely 5 percent. The Italian Green Party (current Olive Tree leader Francesco Rutelli was formerly a leading member of the party) failed to win a single seat and, according to press reports, is considering dissolving itself.

Although a final cabinet is still to be named, political pundits are agreed that two positions are secure. Gianfranco Fini, head of the National Alliance, which has its historical roots in Mussolini's Fascist Party, is to assume the post of deputy prime minister, and Giulio Tremonti, a tax lawyer and economics professor, is to be named Italy's finance minister. Tremonti occupied the post of finance minister in Berlusconi's short-lived government of 1994 and was notorious for implementing the so-called Tremonti tax law favouring Berlusconi's business and media empire.

Tremonti plans as one of his first measures the implementation of House of Freedoms' election pledge to reduce the top level of income tax from 37 percent to 33 percent. Berlusconi has further announced plans to abolish taxes on inheritances and gifts.

In the course of the election campaign Berlusconi, who controls much of Italy's media and is the country's richest individual, promised to resolve within 100 days any conflicts of interest between his government power and his business interests. There is speculation that Berlusconi will transfer large parts of his construction and media empires to his children.

Berlusconi has also promised to implement legislation to limit the right of state attorneys to investigate company books.

Gianfranco Fini has been a close ally of Berlusconi since their coalition of 1994. Fini is regarded as instrumental in the effort of the National Alliance (NA) to distance itself from the fascist roots of the organisation's predecessor, the MSI, which Fini led

from 1991.

Following hostile reaction to comments he made in the early '90s—such as “Mussolini was the greatest statesman of the twentieth century”, and “Fascism has a tradition of honesty, correctness and good government”—Fini learnt to curb his tongue and declared himself a “post-fascist” and democrat.

The more moderate tone of NA leaders is cited by many in Italy, including leading figures within the Olive Tree opposition, to claim the successful integration of a neo-fascist party into the democratic fold. In fact, many of the old cadre of the MSI are still active in the NA, and following the House of Freedoms' electoral victory NA members were observed in celebratory demonstrations yelling nationalist slogans and giving the traditional Fascist salute.

A glance at the Italian region of Latium gives an indication of National Alliance policies in practice. Francesco Storace is president of the region and a leading member of the NA. He has made a name for himself by calling for the establishment of an “historical commission” to review all of the books used in the region's schools so as to correct what he regards as a “biased ” and “communist” presentation of history, i.e., one that emphasises the criminal nature of fascism and Nazism.

For his part, Fini has made clear that one of his first measures upon taking office will be to replace the executive of Italy's state-run radio and television channel RAI. The National Alliance is also expected to fill the post of minister of immigration, which has responsibility for implementing Berlusconi's promise of more rigorous criteria for foreigners attempting to work and live in Italy. A further indication of the authoritarian nature of the new government is the announcement of plans by the Justice Ministry to assign a policeman to every housing block.



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