

# Italy: Berlusconi forms ultra-right cabinet

Peter Schwarz  
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Authoritarian and racist views, disrespect for the most elementary democratic rights, an ultra-free market economic policy combined with unrestrained self-interest, and a clear shift in foreign policy from Brussels to Washington—these are the defining elements of the new Italian government which was sworn into office in Rome on June 11. The government is the most right-wing to have taken power in Europe since the fall of the fascist dictators.

The head of government is media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, the richest man in Italy. As was the case in 1994 when he headed a short-lived government, Berlusconi is governing in an alliance with neo-fascists and separatists. In 1994 his government collapsed after just seven months—torn apart by internal wrangles. This time he has planned things better.

In the first place he has built up his own party, Forza Italia (FI), which he founded in 1994, into an effective political apparatus with 300,000 members. The French newspaper *Libération* commented that “what is characteristic of the party is a cult of leadership, an almost Stalinist-type centralism and a daunting culture of performance”. Secondly, Berlusconi has, as opposed to 1994, integrated the leaders of his two most important coalition parties—Gianfranco Fini of the National Alliance (NA) and Umberto Bossi of the Northern League (NL)—directly into government.

Fini takes over the post of deputy prime minister, the second highest government post behind Berlusconi. The 49-year-old head of the NA is usually described as a “post-fascist”. He began his career in the fascist youth movement and took over its leadership in 1977. Ten years later he took over as head of the core fascist organization, Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), which regarded itself as the direct heir of Benito Mussolini. At the beginning of the '90s he distanced himself from fascism and in 1995 turned the MSI into the National Alliance. The party now describes itself as a “modern European right-wing party.”

In reality, the changes have been largely of a cosmetic nature. Today Fini would refrain from mistakes such as his description some years back of Mussolini as the “greatest statesman of the century”. But the NA still retains its authoritarian outlook and seeks to revise history. Its representatives in regional governments assert that the real criminals and murderers in Italy at the end of the war were not the fascists, but rather the communist resistance fighters.

Bossi has taken over the Ministry for Devolution, which is responsible for the transfer of certain powers from the central government to the regions. The office responsible for the federalisation of the country has been given, of all people, to a man who for years propagated a policy of separatism for Italy's

rich northern region, in pursuit of which he resorted to the vilest forms of racism.

Berlusconi has filled the most important and internationally significant posts—foreign policy, domestic policy, the economy and defence—either with his own people or with experts who enjoy some degree of trust and respect in business and international circles. He thereby hopes to thwart criticism from these circles. Ministries, on the other hand, of mainly domestic importance have been occupied by members of the other parties in his right-wing alliance.

In all, the National Alliance has four ministers, the Northern League three, and the two small Christian Democratic parties, the CCD and CDU, have a minister each. Forza Italia has a total of 10 posts. Five ministers are independent.

The picture becomes even more disturbing when one looks closely at the list of ministers.

The Ministry of Justice is in the hands of the Northern League, which is notorious for its racist tirades and attacks on the judiciary. Originally, Northern League head Bossi insisted on filling the post with his right-hand man, Roberto Maroni. This failed because Maroni has a previous conviction for obstruction. At the moment he is the subject of an investigation for the same offence, as well as offences against the unity of the state. He is also being probed for buying votes. He was eventually consoled with the ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, while his party friend Roberto Castelli assumed the post of justice minister. Castelli is also well known for his past sallies against the judiciary. He is regarded as a separatist and opponent of Italian unity.

The National Alliance, besides occupying the post of deputy prime minister, has received the ministries of agriculture, environment, communication and a new ministry for the affairs of Italians abroad.

The Ministry of Communication, responsible for legislation governing television, is regarded as a particularly sensitive post due to the media power of Berlusconi himself. Originally Berlusconi wanted to staff the post with a member of his own party, but he subsequently made a retreat. Now the job is to be taken by Maurizio Gasparri, the deputy leader of the National Alliance. Amongst the neo-fascists, Gasparri is regarded as the closest to Berlusconi.

Heading the newly created Ministry for Italians Abroad is a man with a notorious fascist past. Mirko Tremaglia first served as an official in Mussolini's republic of Salò and for years was deputy chairman of the MSI. He was a candidate for a ministry post in 1994, but was excluded from consideration because he openly called for the Italian annexation of the former Yugoslav regions of

Istria and Dalmatia, which now belong to Croatia.

Environment Minister Altero Matteoli (NA) has made a name for himself through his opposition to environmental protection. Like US President Bush, he rejects the Kyoto Protocol on global warming. As minister for the environment in the 1994 Berlusconi government he stood out as a lobbyist for highway projects and the opening up of protected natural reserves for hunting.

Berlusconi has filled the important Ministry for Internal Affairs with his closest political confidante, Claudio Scajola, the man primarily responsible for the organisation of Forza Italia over the past four years and its transformation into an effective party. He is the son of a well-known Christian Democratic politician and was himself a Christian Democrat in his youth. He spent a short term in prison at the beginning of the '90s in connection with corruption offences.

The Economics Ministry, which is responsible for finance and budget policies, also went to a trusted colleague of the prime minister. Giulio Tremonti, professor of fiscal law, previously served as Berlusconi's finance minister in 1994. At that time he was responsible for a tax law bearing his name that paved the way for a rebate worth tens of millions to the Berlusconi business empire, effectively rescuing it from collapse. Now he is due to head the new super-ministry that has the job of putting into effect Berlusconi's announced free-market "revolution" and implementing a massive reduction of taxes.

The Defence Ministry will be led by Antonio Martino (FI). Berlusconi originally planned to allocate the ministry to the NA, but he refrained under pressure from the American government, which did not want a neo-fascist occupying such a strategic position for NATO. Martino, a professor of economics who headed the Foreign Ministry in 1994, is regarded as a man with excellent links to the US.

A key position in Berlusconi's cabinet has been assumed by the independent Renato Ruggiero, who holds the post of foreign minister. The 71-year-old economics expert serves as a bridge for Berlusconi to the world of international finance and politics, as well as to the established layers of the Italian bourgeoisie.

In the 1950s and 1960s Ruggiero worked as a diplomat in Moscow, Washington and Belgrade, and then for the European authorities in Brussels. In 1978 he was foreign minister for a brief period and then transferred to a managerial post at the Turin-based Fiat car company. Between 1995 and 1999 he was president of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The *Financial Times Deutschland* described Ruggiero and his task in the new government as follows: "He is highly thought of abroad and has the job of shifting Rome's foreign policy along the coordinates of globalisation and liberal free trade." Other commentaries assess the entry of the former Fiat manager into Berlusconi's government as the latter's peace offering to the Agnelli business dynasty (the owners of Fiat), who have always mistrusted the social climber Berlusconi.

Two other ministers without party affiliation—but not at all politically "independent"—underscore the business orientation of the new government. The minister for innovation, Lucio Stanca, is a former European head of the computer company IBM. Education Minister Letizia Moratti was head of the state-run television

channel RAI under Berlusconi in 1994 and had the job of bringing the station, which was critical of Berlusconi, into line. Afterwards she was hired by the media empire of Rupert Murdoch—a thoroughly dubious qualification for someone leading an education ministry. She has the job of reversing the school reform introduced by the previous centre-left government—a reform that has been the subject of vigorous criticism by Berlusconi.

A striking feature of a number of the new ministers is their pronounced scepticism towards the European Union. This applies not only to the representatives of the Northern League, who, prior to the election, planned their own demonstration against the EU-summit in Nice, and were only prevented by Berlusconi from doing so with great difficulty. Defence Minister Martino and Economics Minister Tremonti are also "Euro-sceptics."

Comments by Tremonti, that he wants Italian agreement to the eastward expansion of the EU to be linked to guarantees for further structural assistance for southern Italy, caused alarm in Brussels. Berlusconi himself has used every opportunity to express his affinity for the American government of President George W. Bush.

There is every indication that the change of power in Italy will lead to new frictions and difficulties in the EU. Signs of such problems are expected this week at the summit of European heads of state to be held in Göteborg, Sweden, where Berlusconi will take part. On Wednesday he made his first international appearance at a NATO summit in Brussels.

A review of Berlusconi's cabinet would not be complete without referring to the head of government himself. Berlusconi is master of a business empire comprising 150 firms, with an annual turnover of \$7 billion and a workforce of 25,000. He controls Italy's three most important private television channels. As Italy's most prominent businessman as well as its prime minister, Berlusconi concentrates in his own hands a degree of power that makes a mockery of established democratic traditions.

Berlusconi had promised to resolve this conflict of interest within 100 days of taking office, but as of yet there is no indication he will make a serious attempt to do so. There is speculation of a "blind trust", which would place his assets under the control of a trustee. It is also possible that he will simply hand everything over to his children, who already have leading positions in his business empire. His announcement of plans to immediately do away with inheritance and gift taxes could be the first step in this direction.



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