

# Italy: Berlusconi changes electoral law to remain in power

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Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is notorious for the fact that he flouts elementary democratic principles and unscrupulously uses his power to defend his own personal interests.

On a number of occasions he has modified laws in order that both he and his relatives could evade legal proceedings and to keep control of his media empire. He has used his influence over both private and public television channels in order to suppress criticism, and to agitate against those judges who are investigating big business corruption and criminality. His authoritarian behaviour has now reached a new pinnacle with his amendment of election law six months before parliamentary elections are due in order to prevent the looming victory of the opposition.

In rushed proceedings on October 13, the Italian Chamber of Deputies adopted electoral reforms whose express purpose is to prevent the ruling coalition—the “House of Liberties” led by Berlusconi—from facing defeat in the elections on April 9, 2006. Three hundred twenty-three deputies from the governing majority voted for the reforms. In protest, the opposition did not participate in the vote, speaking of fraud and a “law of shame.”

The new law replaces the majority vote (or first-past-the-post) system, introduced at the beginning of the 1990s in reaction to the bribe scandals at that time, and which was confirmed in a referendum. Now Berlusconi, supported by the right-wing parliamentary majority, is reintroducing proportional representation—however, with so many special loopholes that it is barely comprehensible to the average voter.

There is no international or historical precedent for most of these exceptions. Their significance can only be understood in the context of the peculiar features and present balance of power in the Italian political landscape.

Whereas in 1993 there were 5 or 6 parliamentary parties, their number has since risen to 20. The first-past-the-post system meant parties have had to form electoral alliances if they wanted to be represented in parliament. Berlusconi’s right-wing alliance has for a long time enjoyed an advantage, since it was more united and less splintered than the opposition.

In the meantime, however, Romano Prodi, a former Italian prime minister and European Union Commission president, has become the generally accepted and undisputed lead candidate of the opposition parties. These have united in an alliance under the name *Unione*, including Margherita (a successor to the Christian Democrats), the Left Democrats (formerly the Italian Communist Party, PCI), the Greens and the Communist Refoundation (*Rifondazione Comunista*, PRC).

On October 16, just three days after the new electoral law was passed, *Unione* conducted primary elections in the American fashion, in order to choose their lead candidate. Anyone who paid one euro and expressed his or her support for *Unione*’s programme could vote. Instead of the 500,000 to 700,000 expected, some 4.2 million voters participated in this *primarie*, with 74 percent voting for Prodi. The high participation represented a significant mobilisation against Berlusconi, who lies far behind Prodi in

the opinion polls.

The new electoral law is aimed at putting as many technical obstacles in the way of the centre-left coalition as possible. It is the result of purely tactical electoral considerations and will most probably not survive the next election, if it is not already eliminated by the president or through the legal process.

It contains three different hurdles that must be overcome to enter parliament—a 10 percent hurdle for coalitions, 4 percent for parties and 2 percent for smaller parties that belong to a coalition. This could pose an insurmountable barrier to several of the small parties inside *Unione*, including the political heirs of Craxi’s Socialist Party and a split-off from *Rifondazione*. It poses less of an obstacle for the right wing, who are less divided.

The new law also makes it impossible for Romano Prodi to stand as an independent candidate on the list of the Left Democrats, as was planned. He must join a party or create his own, which could lead to new discord among the opposition parties.

However, the height of the injustice is that despite the election being held based on proportional representation seats are not assigned according to the share of the votes a party receives. Under the new law, the most successful party coalition is automatically entitled to 340 seats in the 630-seat parliament, even if it receives a far smaller result. Theoretically, an alliance with a 40 percent share of the vote could receive 340 seats, while two parties each polling 30 percent would have to share the remaining 280 seats. Berlusconi, who is also Italy’s richest businessman, wants to ensure that his government remains in power even if the majority of the electorate votes against him.

Berlusconi’s total abuse of the right to vote follows an international trend: Five years ago, George W. Bush stole the US election without achieving a real majority, and in Germany, leading politicians are about to form a grand coalition following neo-liberal policies, openly ignoring the wishes of the electorate.

Inside the Italian government coalition, the electoral reform has met with scepticism on the part of the separatist Northern League of Umberto Bossi, which has its main base in northern Italy and would struggle to win 4 percent of the vote nationwide. Since Berlusconi depends on the support of the Northern League, he has sought to placate it by accepting a long-disputed constitutional amendment.

The constitutional amendment was passed by parliament on October 20 and fulfils an old demand of the Northern League to grant the regions more autonomy, particularly the demand to “uncouple” the relatively wealthier north from the poorer south. To stay in power, it appears Berlusconi’s House of Liberties is ready to accept the danger of the nation state breaking apart.

The constitutional amendment also grants the prime minister some considerable additional powers at the expense of the president. In future, the prime minister, and not the president, will decide when to dissolve parliament, and will also appoint or dismiss all ministers. This is directed

against the incumbent president, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who has several times already prevented new laws emanating from Berlusconi's government taking force.

In parallel with the electoral reforms, Berlusconi has also abolished the law granting parties equal access to election spots broadcast on television. In future, there will be no legal restrictions on the transmission of election advertising spots. It is expected that Berlusconi's Forza Italia will pump millions into the election campaign.

Despite the dangers of Berlusconi's attacks on democratic and social rights, there is no opposition in today's Italy prepared to mobilise the population against the autocrats at the head of the government.

The protests, demonstrations and strikes against the policies of the Berlusconi government, in which the fascists of the National Alliance also sit, have been growing for years and encompass broad layers of society, including private and public sector workers, students, intellectuals and those in the cultural sector.

Two years ago, millions participated in the demonstrations against Italian support for the Iraq war. Cabin crew and air traffic controllers at Alitalia have been in dispute for months; throughout Italy, students are striking against university "reforms"; before that, journalist conducted a two-day strike. There have been strikes by public transit drivers and health workers, and, a few weeks ago, there was a national strike by engineering workers.

On October 15, prominent film directors Roberto Benigni, the Taviani brothers, Ettore Scola, Nanni Moretti and many others participated in a national strike in which artists and those working in the creative sector protested against annual cuts of €160 million in cultural spending. Berlusconi had defended the cuts, which affects all theatres, opera houses, museums and even the Venice Film Festival, claiming that the work of 1,000 employees at La Scala opera house could "easily be done by 400."

On October 20, over 11 million (50 percent of the TV audience) watched the broadcast "Rock Politics" by singer Adriano Celentano about "freedom of opinion." Celentano had invited TV journalist Michele Santoro, who had been sacked for making critical comments about Berlusconi. Celentano quoted from an international table of press freedom, according to which Italy was ranked 77 alongside Bolivia and Mongolia. He compared conditions in Italy today with those that prevailed under fascist leader Benito Mussolini in the 1930s.

In contrast to the resistance among the population, the opposition in parliament has proven toothless. Its response to the constitutional and electoral reforms is limited to a threat to appeal again to President Ciampi or to the Supreme Court, and "in certain circumstances" (Prodi) to call for a referendum against the constitutional amendment.

The reason for Prodi's tame reaction is that he, like Berlusconi, also fears a broad social mobilisation. The former European Union Commission president advocates a programme of economic "reforms" that differs only in the slightest degree from Tony Blair's in Britain or Angela Merkel's in Germany.

The official programme of *Unione* supports the economic "reforms" of the European Union and obscures its attitude to the Iraq war in "pacifist" phrases, including an acknowledgment that the UN is the only legitimate international arbiter.

Prodi recently outlined his programme in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, reported on October 25: "Asked why he was again putting himself forward in an election campaign, Prodi answered that he wanted 'a mandate from the people for a full five years and in this time would thoroughly reform Italy, independently of party-political controversy. It is necessary to return productivity and competitive ability to Italy after five bad years under Berlusconi.... The fact he led Italy into the European monetary union as prime minister in 1998 is to his credit among ordinary people, trade unionists and the business community..."

"He continued, saying he was relying 'on a strong upturn in the German economy,' which is vital for Italy. He had always looked on the foreign trips of the German chancellor with the bosses of the large German industrial enterprises with envy.... The takeover of the second largest German bank by an Italian institute was a 'positive sign.' "

Prodi is one of the most tried and trusted representatives of the Italian bourgeoisie. Already with ministerial experience in 1978, the Christian Democrat for many years headed Italy's largest state-owned industrial complex, IRI, whose privatisation he prepared. As head of the last centre-left government, he ensured Italy qualified to enter the European monetary union through implementing drastic austerity measures. In 1999, Prodi became European Union Commission president. His term of office included EU expansion into eastern Europe and the drafting of a neo-liberal European Union constitution, which was then rejected by the voters in France and Holland.

Despite the personal hostility between Berlusconi and Prodi, their programmes differ only in tactical regard. Berlusconi represents the ruthless social climbers who have enriched themselves because of globalisation. He relies on cultural backwardness and the most right-wing elements in the petty bourgeoisie, whom he positions against the working class.

Prodi, on the other hand, is supported by Italy's traditional large-scale industrialists. He tries to keep the working class in check by bringing their traditional parties and the trade unions into government. While Berlusconi orients himself strongly towards Bush and the US, Prodi sets greater store in European imperialism.

Prodi receives indispensable support from *Rifondazione Comunista*. The PRC emerged at the beginning of the 1990s from a wing of the Italian Communist Party and has since then absorbed a large section of the radical left in Italy. For many years, it tried to perform a balancing act between the extra-parliamentary movements and the official bourgeois left. While it supported and participated in extra-parliamentary protests, it provided various centre-left governments with the necessary majority in the parliament, without ever taking on government responsibility.

Last year, after being heavily courted by Prodi, *Rifondazione* decided to join the *Unione* alliance and join his government should it win the election. PRC boss Fausto Bertinotti stood as an official candidate in the primaries and with 15 percent received the second best result. By participating in the internal proceeding of *Unione*, he implicitly recognises Prodi's legitimacy to claim the leadership, as the winner in the primaries.

In this way, *Rifondazione* is blocking the way to an independent political movement of the working class. While Berlusconi is moving ever more openly in the direction of authoritarian forms of rule, and Prodi reacts with passivity, *Rifondazione* is providing a left cover. It is patently clear that the situation requires a political alternative to both bourgeois blocs in order to defend the fundamental democratic rights and the most elementary needs of the working people.



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