

Parliamentary elections in Italy

Mudslinging obscures lack of alternative

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Parliamentary elections are due to take place this weekend in Italy. For the past five years, the country has been governed by a right-wing coalition led by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Any sober analysis of the government's record in office would lead to the conclusion that it has to go. There are few comparable examples of a government that has aroused such enmity within broad layers of the population.

Berlusconi supported the Iraq war and sent 3,000 Italian soldiers to the Euphrates, although the overwhelming majority of the population opposes the war. He has used the government's legislative powers in a thoroughly unscrupulous manner to further the interests of his business empire and avoid a series of legal prosecutions for bribery and connections to the Mafia. The economy is stagnating while the cost of living is rising. The unemployment rate has officially dropped to 8 percent, but this decline is largely due to the legalization of clandestine forms of employment and the increase in low-wage jobs (such as domestic help). For young people and women the rate of unemployment exceeds 25 percent.

Even the Italian business association, which firmly backed Berlusconi five years ago, has now turned in its majority against him. They accuse the media tycoon of concentrating on increasing his own wealth instead of rapidly implementing the "reforms" he promised—i.e., welfare cuts. The business lobby is especially worried about Italy's huge national debt and continuing budgetary deficits.

On March 8, Italy's largest circulation daily paper *Corriere della Sera*, made its election recommendation in favor of the opposition leader Romano Prodi. At the time of the previous election in 2001, *Corriere* had backed Silvio Berlusconi, but this time round the paper's chief editor Paolo Mieli wrote, "The government gives the impression it is more worried about the solution of its own internal squabbles and the personal interests of the Prime Minister than those of the country."

Mario Draghi, head of the Italian central bank, delivered a devastating balance sheet which was published three weeks before the election: during the period of Berlusconi's governance, Italy has lost 30 percent of its competitive power, and businessmen today are confronted with the stagnation of the country's gross domestic product, a loss of exports, declining investment and increased labor costs.

Berlusconi is also increasingly isolated on the international stage. Former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who once assisted Berlusconi's party Forza Italia to gain membership in the Christian-Democratic European parliamentary group, recently met with Berlusconi's adversary Romano Prodi at an election campaign meeting in Rome. Even the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, which speaks for Swiss finance capital has written: "Italy cannot afford another five years of Berlusconi."

Although Berlusconi is facing opposition from all sides, the outcome of the election still remains an open question. Opinion polls give the opposition a lead of between four and five percent, but nearly a quarter of the electorate is still undecided. A last minute turnaround has not been ruled out.

How can this be explained? How can such a corrupt and discredited

figure as Berlusconi still have any serious chance of electoral victory?

Numerous commentaries attempt to attribute this to the media monopoly and show-business talent of the 69 year old, who is prepared to go to any lengths to discredit his opponents. While such factors may play a role, they are insufficient to explain why Berlusconi still has support. His real strength lies in the impotence of his opponents.

The concerns and needs of the broad masses of the population have been ignored in this election campaign. The entire opposition, totaling 11 parties and party alliances, united under the name *Unione*, has rallied behind a man who embodies Italian capitalism like no other.

Romano Prodi is economics professor, manager and bourgeois politician rolled into one. He began his political career with the Christian Democrats, then took over the gigantic state enterprise IRI, which he privatized before taking over as head of government in 1996. In this function he prepared Italy for the introduction of the euro via drastic social and welfare cuts. In 1998, he was forced to resign, and one year later he took over the presidency of the European Union Commission. His period in office saw the extension of the European Union to the East and the elaboration of a European constitution, which was then subsequently voted down by referenda in France and Holland.

The main topics dominating the last phase of the Italian election campaign are taxes and economic policy, and on these issues Prodi has attacked the head of government from the right. The *Unione* election program bears the title "Reliability in Government" and demands a speedy consolidation of the budget. Prodi has promised big business a five percent cut in social expenditure contributions—a measure which is only possible on the basis of large scale cuts in pensions and healthcare.

The media accuses Prodi of lacking charisma and coming across as stiff and professorial. However, the real problem is the content of his policies, not his supposed lack of personal appeal. Voters confronted with unemployment and a sinking standard of living are not particularly interested in whether or not the deficit of the Italian budget fulfills the EU Maastricht criteria in the coming year. They have their own worries about the future and are looking for a way out of the social crisis. Prodi is incapable of offering them such a perspective.

Berlusconi has used this fact to manipulate and whip up widespread fears with shameless demagoguery. He is prepared to go to any length to encourage the most backward prejudices—including jokes in the worst possible taste, sexual innuendos, and outright lies. His manner has become increasingly hysterical—a clear expression of the mounting crisis in the government camp.

In recent weeks, Berlusconi has increasingly lost his nerve. During an interview with the national television station RAI he fled the studio in a rage when program host Lucia Annunziata asked him a few uncomfortable questions. On March 18, he publicly insulted the boss of a shoe company at a congress of the business association *Confindustria*. Entrepreneurs who were prepared to support the opposition, Berlusconi told the assembled business elite, are either mad or have "corpses in the

closet.”

A recurring theme in Berlusconi’s campaign is anticommunism. Without exception, he denounces all those who oppose him, including political opponents and those judges who have sought to try him, as “communists” and “red robes.” Recently he behaved in such a vulgar manner at a meeting in Naples that the Chinese Ambassador felt compelled to make an official protest. Berlusconi had declared that Chinese communists would have cooked small children in order to use them as fertilizers for their fields.

Berlusconi’s election campaign coalition amounts to a right-wing cabinet of horrors. Along with Forza Italia led by the head of government himself, it includes the neo-fascist National Alliance, the separatist Northern League and the Christian-Democratic UDC as well as two small fascist parties. One of the latter is led by the granddaughter of the Duce, Alessandra Mussolini, with whom Berlusconi recently formed an electoral pact.

The Northern League, which is notorious for its xenophobic campaigns, has also been acting more and more erratically. It immediately backed Berlusconi in his agitation against China and went even further. Former Minister Roberto Calderoli (NL) declared: “In China they really did eat their children, and today their enterprises are devouring ours with unfair competition.” Calderoli had been forced to resign in February after sporting an anti-Muslim caricature on his t-shirt. As a result of his provocation, demonstrations were held against an Italian agency in Libya in which 11 persons were shot by security forces.

Romano Prodi has no party of his own. His most important support stems from three organizations which emerged from the break up of the Italian Communist Party in 1991: The Left Democrats (DS - Democratici di Sinistra), Communist Refoundation (Partito Rifondazione Comunista) and the Italian Communists, a split-off from Rifondazione.

They have joined together with broad range of bourgeois parties, including the liberal-Catholic Margherita, the Greens, the European-oriented Christian Democrats (UDEUR), and the list Italia dei Valori led by Antonio di Pietro. None of these bourgeois splinter groups has any notable influence. Their task is restricted to guaranteeing that Prodi’s *Unione* remains within the political limits acceptable to the Italian bourgeoisie.

A particularly important role in this alliance is being played by Rifondazione—the “Party of Communist Refoundation”. In contrast to the Left Democrats, who openly acknowledge their allegiance to capitalism, Rifondazione still uses communist terminology and declares it is fighting for a socialist perspective.

Following the breakup of Italy’s post war Communist Party in 1991, Rifondazione preserved the symbol of the hammer and the sickle and the name “communist” In the years following it was able to absorb a number of petty- bourgeois radical groups into its ranks. It was looked upon as a role model by other radicals throughout Europe, although its parliamentary deputies had already supported the Prodi government in the nineties.

At a Party Congress held in Venice in March of last year, Rifondazione decided not only to support Romano Prodi’s parliamentary ambitions but also accept ministries in his government when called upon. It justified this open surrender with the notorious political thesis of the “lesser evil”. According to party official Fausto Bertinotti, speaking in Venice, the people want to drive out Berlusconi. “Whoever fails to contribute to implementing this goal will disappear from the political scene and lose contact with the masses.”

In the meantime, Bertinotti is trying to dispel the impression that the program of *Unione* corresponds to that of the employers. In an article in the newspaper *Liberazione* entitled “Confindustria is not a friend” he stated: “The position outlined by the president (of Confindustria) Luca Cordero di Montezemolo differs substantially from the *Unione* program.”

At the same time, however, he praised Montezemolo’s shift to back Prodi: “It is good that Confindustria has given up . . . the political position of its previous leadership and the anti-union confrontational course which it followed in accord with the Berlusconi government.”

Only the toppling of Berlusconi, Bertinotti repeated in ritual fashion, opens up the possibility of a new epoch of social reforms. “It is our goal to drive out Berlusconi to open up a new round of reforms,” he had told the congress in Venice.

This statement is obviously absurd. Romano Prodi stands for a political program which is rejected by the overwhelming majority of the European population and is currently being opposed by millions who have taken to the streets in France.

The classical argument claiming one must support the “lesser evil” is being carried to the point of absurdity by Bertinotti in his support for Romano Prodi: The so-called “lesser evil” means in this case a better and more efficient implementation of exactly the same social attacks. The principal purpose of this argument is to prevent an independent socialist movement of the working class and youth.

The cowardly surrender by Rifondazione Comunista contains enormous dangers. The solidarity of the so-called “left” with the employers association gives Berlusconi a renewed chance to appeal to the “little man” with his populist demagoguery.

In undertaking to support Romano Prodi, Rifondazione is assuming an enormous responsibility for all coming attacks on the working class. The determination with which PRC seeks to participate in government is demonstrated by the fact that the party has struck one candidate, Marco Ferrando, from its electoral list following Ferrando’s comment that the Iraqi resistance had the right to shoot at Italian soldiers occupying Iraq.

In a concentrated form, the Italian elections reveal the fundamental problem confronting the working class throughout Europe: the necessity to develop a new, independent party which fights for a socialist program.



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