Center-left alliance wins Italian election by razor-thin majority

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The center-left coalition led by the former European Union commission chairman Romano Prodi has emerged the winner of Italian parliamentary elections held on Sunday and Monday with a razor-thin majority.

In the election for the Lower House (Chamber of Deputies), Prodi's alliance *Unione* received 49.8 percent of the vote, just 0.07 percent in front of the *Casa delle Libertà* (House of Liberties) led by the acting head of the government, Silvio Berlusconi. While a total of 47 million were eligible to vote, Prodi's numerical advantage over his rival amounted to just 25,000 votes.

In the election to the Upper House (Senate), the Berlusconi alliance actually won 50.2 percent of the vote, a 1.3 percent advantage over Prodi's *Unione*. But due to the peculiarities of Italy's electoral law, the Prodi camp was able to win two more seats. Unlike the seats for the Chamber of Deputies, which are based on national percentages, the senatorial seats are distributed on the basis of regional results, and the voting age is 25 years instead of 18. It was the votes from 2.6 million Italians living abroad, who elect 6 of the 314 Senators, that swung the result in favor of Prodi.

The election turnout was relatively high at 84 percent (2 percent higher than at the last elections five years ago) following a very polarised election campaign.

After the closing of polling stations on Monday at 3:00 p.m., it took 20 hours until the final result was announced. The first exit polls had forecast a clear victory for the opposition in both chambers of parliament. But towards evening, it became clear that both camps were running neck-and-neck and planned victory celebrations were called off. On early Tuesday, it looked as if Prodi would win the Lower House and Berlusconi the Senate—a result that would have made the formation of a government extremely difficult. It was only the counting of the postal vote from Italians living abroad that finally decided the result in favor of Prodi.

Romano Prodi has since declared himself the victor in the election and announced, "We will now govern for five years." The Berlusconi camp has refused to acknowledge defeat and demanded a recount of the entire vote. "Such a close result requires a detailed examination," Berlusconi's speaker Paolo Bonaiuti said. There are "at least a half million votes" that could possibly be invalid.

Prodi owes his majority to the new Italian electoral law that had been decided on six months ago by the Berlusconi government in the face of huge resistance from the opposition. The new law replaces the first past the post system (based on the British model), which has been in force since the mid-1990s, by a system based on proportional representation that contains a large number of exception clauses and three different types of percentage hurdles. According to Berlusconi's thinking at the time, this new electoral law was to create as many obstacles as possible for a thoroughly fractured opposition.

The plan failed, and the new electoral system ended up benefiting the Prodi camp. In particular, it was able to profit from a special clause of the new law that grants at least 55 percent of seats to the majority parliamentary group—irrespective of its actual election result. Thus, Prodi's razor-thin lead of 25,000 votes was transformed into a comfortable parliamentary majority of 340 to 277 seats.

Nevertheless, the narrow election result is a source of concern for ruling circles in Italy and Europe. Nearly all Italian newspapers commented on the result with the headline "Italy split in two," and the European press predicted a "relapse to politically unstable times" for the country.

In the course of his election campaign, Prodi was not only able to rely on the support of the trade unions and the entire official left—including all the successor organisations of Italy's Communist Party—he also won support from broad sections of Italian and European big business who are thoroughly disenchanted with Berlusconi.

While the media magnate has been able to double his own personal wealth during his five-year reign to an estimated 12 billion euros, the Italian economy has stagnated. It grew by an average of just 0.35 percent per year, compared with 1.45 percent for the rest of Europe. Although Berlusconi failed to introduce promised tax cuts, the country's budgetary deficit increased dramatically. Towards the end of the election campaign, Berlusconi promised new tax cuts and social programs that would have worsened the budget deficit.

Berlusconi also failed to introduce the deregulation of the job market he promised—not least because of embittered resistance

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by the working class. His entire term of office was dogged by repeated general strikes, in which up to 13 million workers took part. He was only able to survive because the trade unions ensured that each of the strikes was limited to just one day.

Italy's business lobby is looking to Prodi to implement their interests with more consistency and determination. In his election program, economic expert Prodi prioritised the consolidation of the national budget and a lowering of wage incorporated social security contributions by 5 percent. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Prodi's government must now "undertake all the free market reforms of taxes, the job market and social security contributions which the right promised but failed to implement." He has nothing to offer other then "blood, sweat and tears."

Unlike Berlusconi, Prodi seeks to achieve his aims in collaboration with the trade unions, rather than against them. From this standpoint, the inclusion of *Rifondazione Comunista* (*Communist Refoundation)* in his electoral alliance and government is of great importance. This party, which still uses left-wing terminology, maintains close links to the trade unions. Its task is to subordinate militantly minded workers and youth to a Prodi government.

Rifondazione was able to win 5.8 and 7.4 percent in the respective votes and notch up a significant election success. It now has 41 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 27 seats in the Senate. An additional 16 seats in the Chamber of Deputies have been taken by members of *Comunisti Italiani*, a split-off from *Rifondazione*.

The sharp polarisation of the country that emerged in both the election campaign and the election result makes Prodi's task much more difficult. His first reaction was to hold out a hand of reconciliation to the Berlusconi camp. "Now we must begin to unite the country" were his first words.

The Christian Democrats allied with Berlusconi responded promptly. Their leader, Culture Minister Rocco Buttiglione, declared it was now necessary to avoid a political crisis that would only deter potential investors. "We must immediately send a message to the markets that the country is not falling apart." The influential British *Financial Times* had already declared in March that the only hope for Italy was a "grand coalition" incorporating both rival camps.

Following such a violent and aggressive election campaign, however, any collaboration between Prodi and Berlusconi appears highly improbable. And, despite heavy losses, Berlusconi's *Forza Italia (Go Italy!)* is still the largest single grouping in the new parliament. It won 23.7 percent of the vote—around twice as much as the second placed party in the camp of the right wing, the post-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance)*.

In his election campaign, Berlusconi was able to profit from the fact that broad popular discontent lacked any possibility of independent political articulation. Under conditions where the entire so-called "left" supported the rightwing bourgeois program of Romano Prodi, there was nobody left to represent the social interests of the broad masses.

For his part Berlusconi appealed to the fears and most backward instincts of petty bourgeois and impoverished layers employing a type of demagogy that Europe has not seen since the days of Fascism. The richest man in Italy posed as the advocate of the ordinary citizen and flagrantly offended the most elementary rules of political decency. He lambasted the supporters of the opposition in the most vulgar fashion. At an election rally, he called those voting for *Unione* "*coglioni,*" which literally means "testicles" and in colloquial Italian "stupid idiots."

Berlusconi embodies a wing of the bourgeoisie that places its own egoistic interests above everything else, and which is increasingly influential on the international stage. One newspaper summed up his motto with the words "Free rein for self-interest." It is no coincidence that Berlusconi ranks both the American president George W. Bush and Russian president Vladimir Putin amongst his personal friends. One should also not forget the British prime minister, Tony Blair, who spent his vacation in Berlusconi's private mansion.

Berlusconi represents an international tendency that is reacting to increasing social tensions by moving towards authoritarian forms of rule. It should not be forgotten that his electoral alliance included two fascist splinter parties that openly base themselves on the heritage of Italy's former Fascist leader, Benito Mussolini. In terms of votes, their results were insignificant. Together, the *Fiamma Tricolore* and the *Alternativa Sociale* led by the granddaughter of the Duce, Alessandra Mussolini, received barely 1.3 percent of the vote and will not be represented in the new parliament. But they are indicative of the direction Berlusconi is headed.

The result of the recent election confirms that Prodi's alliance *Unione* is not an alternative to the dangers embodied by Berlusconi. If Prodi should form a government, its pro-capitalist program would only serve to deepen the social crisis and decay of the country, supplying Berlusconi and his allies fresh opportunities to exploit their right-wing demagogy.

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