

Italian prime minister resigns after losing foreign policy vote

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23 February 2007

Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi tendered his resignation Wednesday night after losing a Senate vote on his center-left coalition government's foreign policy. The collapse of the nine-month-old Unione government came amidst growing popular opposition to its right-wing policies, both domestic and foreign.

Just four days before the Senate vote and Prodi's subsequent resignation, more than 100,000 demonstrated in the northern Italian city of Vicenza to protest Prodi's support for the expansion of a US military base there and plans to increase the deployment of Italian troops as part of the NATO-led occupation of Afghanistan. Demonstrators also denounced the war in Iraq and demanded that the government end its collaboration with the Bush administration's militarist policies.

Prodi and Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema, a leader of the ex-Stalinist Democratic Left Party and a former prime minister, had called for the vote in order to obtain a public show of unity behind the government's imperialist and pro-US foreign policy from the nine parties that comprised the governing coalition, targeting, in particular, Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation), a Stalinist remnant of the old Italian Communist Party that postures as a socialist and anti-imperialist party.

The main speaker on behalf of the government in the Senate debate was D'Alema, who articulated the duplicity of the official Italian left by asserting in one breath that the Unione coalition "have not supported the neo-conservative politics of the American administration and we have not sent soldiers to Iraq," and in the next defending Italian military deployments in Afghanistan and Lebanon and declaring that to oppose US plans to expand its base at Vicenza "would be a hostile act against the United States."

The decision to put the government's foreign policy up for a vote expressed its view that backing for the expanded US military base and Italy's military role in Afghanistan were crucial issues upon which it would not compromise, regardless the growing opposition of the Italian people. In taking this stand, it was acting under pressure both from the United States and the most powerful forces within the Italian ruling elite.

In effect, Prodi and D'Alema were delivering a political ultimatum to the Rifondazione leadership to rein in dissident factions that have sought to appease growing opposition among the party's voters and supporters to its participation in a government committed to economic austerity at home and expanding military interventions abroad.

Rifondazione Comunista had indicated it would back the government in the Senate vote and all but one of its senators followed the party line. However, the abstention of one Rifondazione senator, Franco Turigliatto, together with the abstentions of a Green Party senator and Senator-for-Life Giulio Andreotti, a former Christian Democratic prime minister and long-time power broker in Italian politics, caused the government to fall short by two votes of the 160 it needed to prevail.

Although the motion was not presented as a vote of confidence in the government, Prodi quickly made the decision to tender his resignation, precipitating a full-scale political crisis and upping the pressure on Rifondazione Comunista to discipline its own ranks.

After tendering his resignation, Prodi declared he was prepared to continue as head of government only under conditions where he had a "rock solid majority" and "more room to manoeuvre." Prodi aides have declared that he is "ready to carry on as prime minister if, and only if, he is guaranteed the full support of all the

parties in the majority from now on.”

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano accepted Prodi’s resignation but asked him to continue the affairs of government and participate in negotiations aimed at finding a solution to the crisis. The two principal available options are new elections or a re-jigging of the Prodi cabinet to achieve some sort of sustainable majority. In either case, the inevitable result will be a government of an even more right-wing cast.

Prodi has declared his readiness to talk with conservative Christian Democrats who have broken away from former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi’s umbrella organization Forza Italia. The presence of more conservatives would increase Prodi’s leverage over the nominal left in a refashioned center-left coalition.

Although senators from the parties of the official right—principally Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and Gianfranco Fini’s National Alliance—called for a new election following the Senate vote, to this point Berlusconi has not issued such a demand. Berlusconi was voted out of office last May as a result of popular opposition combined with disaffection within major sections of the ruling elite itself over his performance as prime minister.

The London-based *Financial Times* indicated the general preference of international finance capital in an editorial posted Thursday on its web site, entitled “Prodding Italy’s Centre Towards a Coalition.” The newspaper praised Prodi for acting “to reduce the budget deficit” and said his government’s “agenda of reform” had “done much to boost confidence.”

It denounced Berlusconi’s government for having “lacked fiscal discipline and failed to make reforms to the Italian economy,” and urged “Italy’s centrist parties” to “try to form some kind of coalition.”

This vote of confidence in Prodi from the international bourgeoisie was echoed by the supposedly anti-capitalist Rifondazione Comunista. In 1998, the party withdrew its parliamentary support for a center-left coalition headed by Prodi, precipitating the fall of the government. This time around Rifondazione was eager to assure Prodi of its continued support.

According to *La Repubblica*, party secretary Franco Giordano declared, “The government must survive,” adding that it “will have the full support und the unconditional confidence of Rifondazione Comunista”.

The Rifondazione web site posted a prominent statement declaring its loyalty to the Prodi government. In the same statement, the party attacked the stance taken in the Senate debate by the defector Turigliatto as “undemocratic.” Turigliatto has in the meantime announced that he is yielding up his post as senator.

The Democratic Left likewise pledged its support for a new edition of the Prodi government. Marina Sereni demanded that “all members of Unione not only vote ‘Yes,’ but also undertake to support future actions by the government such as the deployment of Italian troops to Afghanistan.”

At this point it is not possible to predict the immediate outcome of the collapse of the center-left government. However, its record as an instrument of Italian big business in attacking working class living standards at home while pursuing imperialist policies abroad is a further demonstration of the bankruptcy of the so-called parties of the left: the Democratic Left and Rifondazione Comunista. Neither of these organizations has any genuine independence from the bourgeoisie. Both function to throttle popular discontent and maintain the political subordination of the working masses to Italian capital.

Their participation in Prodi’s right-wing regime and their efforts to resuscitate it following its ignominious collapse demonstrate conclusively that the struggle against war and social reaction requires a break with these parties and the building of a genuinely independent and socialist political movement of the working class.



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