

Elections called in Italy

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President Giorgio Napolitano dissolved the two chambers of the Italian legislature, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, February 6 after efforts to form an interim government had failed. New elections have been set for April 13 and 14.

The centre-left government of Prime Minister Romano Prodi, which had replaced the right-wing alliance led by media magnate Silvio Berlusconi in May 2006, was able to remain in office for less than two years. Prodi's own popularity plummeted after he ensured the expansion of a US military base in Northern Italy, and the participation of Italian troops in Afghanistan and Lebanon. These policies were pursued in the teeth of massive popular opposition. Meanwhile, the Italian population is also beginning to feel the consequences of Prodi's harsh budgetary policy.

With the fulsome support of the European financial elite Prodi had reorganized Italian state finances, which had become heavily indebted under Berlusconi. He also denationalized state property and broke up the traditional Italian pension system. In January, inflation reached its highest levels for ten years, with far-reaching consequences for the living standards of working people.

Prodi's government consisted of an alliance of no less than nine separate parties, including the Left Democrats and Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista), which both emerged from the Italian Communist Party. Both parties remained loyal to Prodi as popular opposition to his government grew. It was the right-wing Christian Democratic splinter party Udeur (Democratic Union for Europe), which finally delivered Prodi's government the mortal blow. It withdrew from the government coalition, because its leader, Justice Minister Clemente Mastella, was deeply embroiled in a corruption scandal and felt he had not received sufficient backing from Prodi.

The 80-year-old president, Napolitano, then gave the 74-year-old president of the Senate, Franco Marini, a former Christian Democrat, the job of forming an interim government. Such a transitional regime would have had the task of reforming electoral laws prior to new elections.

The major parties had hoped that a reform of the voting law would increase their political weight at the expense of smaller parties in the parliament, thus allowing a clear majority to emerge.

Marini, however, was unable to secure a majority for an interim government. Although they had also expressed their support for electoral law reform, Silvio Berlusconi and his closest partner, Franco Fini, leader of the post-fascist National Alliance, demanded immediate new elections. Berlusconi even threatened a march of his supporters on Rome if the parliament was not dissolved. With the public opinion polls indicating a lead of up to 16 percent for the right-wing parties, the 71-year-old Berlusconi senses that—following his 1994 and 2001 ascensions to power—he could head an Italian government for a third time.

How the election will end, however, remains unclear. According to opinion polls, a large part of the electorate is still undecided. Both political camps have commenced a series of manoeuvres that—under conditions where neither has any answer to the urgent social problems of the country—revolve around superficial issues.

Romano Prodi has announced his resignation from politics and is leaving the field open to the 52-year-old mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni. Veltroni heads the Democratic Party, which was founded last autumn through the unification of the two largest partners in Prodi's coalition, the Left Democrats and the Christian-democratic Margherita.

Veltroni has a 35-year career behind him in the Communist Party and its successor organizations. From 1992 to 1996, he was editor-in-chief of the party newspaper *L'Unità*, and from 1996 to 1998, he was deputy prime minister and culture minister in the first government led by Prodi.

In 2001, he was elected mayor of Rome, where he has achieved a certain degree of popularity through a mixture of glamour and pragmatism. Veltroni comes from a big bourgeois family and likes to pose for the media alongside film and cultural stars. He set up a film festival and took

measures to improve the tourist infrastructure of the city.

His politics are right-wing. He has called for the rapid deportation of “criminal foreigners,” tax cuts and the reduction of the national debt by the selling off of state-owned assets.

Veltroni’s role model is Barack Obama, the candidate of the Democratic Party in the US presidential election. He has been acquainted with Obama since 2005 and wrote a preface for his autobiography. Now Veltroni is copying his election campaign in detail. Like Obama he presents himself as the candidate for “change” and has even adopted his election slogan “Yes we can!”

Although the existing electoral law favours party alliances, Veltroni has decided to enter the election without allies. He is hoping to benefit from popular discontent over the wheeling and dealing between the various parties by posing as the candidate of a unified movement. Like Nicolas Sarkozy in France, he is hoping that, with his promise of a “new beginning,” he can draw large sections of the media behind him. Under conditions where Italian electoral law automatically awards the party with the most votes the majority of the seats in the Lower House, Veltroni’s strategy holds a certain chance of success. This regulation does not apply to the Senate, however.

At the same time, Veltroni is not without opposition in his own party. Founded four months ago, the Democrats have neither a clear program that could unite its various wings, nor a national apparatus capable of organizing an election campaign. Veltroni’s sharpest internal-party opponent is considered to be Massimo D’Alema, who like Veltroni came out of the Communist Party and headed the Italian government from 1998 to 2000.

Berlusconi has reacted nervously to Veltroni’s election strategy. In response to Veltroni’s initiative and to prevent the Democrats winning a majority, Berlusconi has given his own Forza Italia a face lift, renamed it “People of Liberty” and drawn up a list of joint candidates with Fini’s National Alliance, on the basis that both parties refrain from using their own names and logos. Fini, who has been striving to take over from Berlusconi as the leader of the right wing, supports this proposal.

At the same time, Berlusconi’s initiative led to sharp tensions with the Christian Democratic UDC, which was part of Berlusconi’s last coalition government. It has also now declared its intention of standing independently in the election. The separatist Northern League (Lega Nord) will not stand candidates on the lists of “People of Liberty,” but has declared its intention of forming an

“external alliance” with Berlusconi’s revamped organisation.

Prodi’s former “left” coalition partner has reacted to Veltroni’s initiative by establishing a party alliance with the name “La Sinistra Arcobaleno” (the Left Rainbow). It consists of Rifondazione Comunista, the Comunisti Italiani (a split off from Rifondazione), Sinistra Democratica (a split off from the Left Democrats) and the Greens.

So far, the Rainbow Alliance has been unable to agree on either a party symbol or a program. The three groupings with their origins in the Communist Party have pleaded for a hammer and sickle but the Greens are vehemently opposed. The head of the Greens, Alfonso Pecaro Scanio, has declared that the policies of Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero should serve as a model for the new grouping.

The head of the Rainbow left is Fausto Bertinotti, long-time leader of Rifondazione and an important prop for the Prodi government in his function as president of the Chamber of Deputies. Bertinotti’s successor in the leadership of Rifondazione, Franco Giordano, stressed that the new alliance will not stand in the way of an electoral victory for Veltroni. It competes with the Democrats, but the duel between them will be “loyal and not destructive,” he said. “We must ensure that the elections do not favour the right.”

The Rainbow Alliance is not a socialist alternative to the two main party blocs. Instead its main purpose is to prevent the growing social opposition from developing into a genuine independent political movement against the politics of these blocs.



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