

Italian elections: polls favour Berlusconi comeback

Peter Schwarz
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According to the latest opinion polls, Silvio Berlusconi is likely to be elected as Italy's prime minister for the third time in parliamentary elections set for this Sunday and Monday. The two chambers of parliament were dissolved after the centre-left government led by Romano Prodi lost its majority after only 20 months in office.

Berlusconi was already elected to the post in 1994 and 2001. His electoral alliance "People of Freedom" (PdL - Popolo della Libertà) is polling around 45 percent — approximately a seven-point lead over its main rival, the Democratic Party led by Walter Veltroni. In line with the electoral law established during Berlusconi's last period in power, the party with the most votes in the election is guaranteed at least 340 seats in the 630-seat Chamber of Deputies, meaning that a majority for Berlusconi is in the cards. Nevertheless, the final decision rests in the hands of the electorate.

A majority for Berlusconi is less assured in the Senate, which is also of great importance for the government. Here the majority bonus is not reckoned on a federal but rather on a regional level, and the right to vote for this chamber is restricted to those 25 or over, instead of 18 for the lower house. In the Senate, the Christian Democratic UDC and the Rainbow Left coalition, which according to polls could win 7 percent of the vote respectively, could play a decisive role.

What lies behind Berlusconi's return?

The possible return to power by Berlusconi has led to expressions of astonishment and anger both in Italy and abroad. More than any other European politician, the 71-year-old media tycoon and multi-billionaire is regarded as a symbol of corruption and is known for close links to organized crime and the extreme right wing.

From the outset, Berlusconi's political career was closely bound up with his business interests, which have made him Italy's richest citizen and given him a monopoly over the country's private television channels. As prime minister, he was also able to dominate public television channels by selectively replacing key personnel.

When Berlusconi entered politics 16 years ago, his business empire was on the brink of bankruptcy and he was facing a real threat of being jailed. Following numerous changes to the law and a vendetta against Italian judges, he was finally able to shake off numerous charges of bribery, fraud, tax evasion, extortion, connections to the mafia and illegal political donations. Most commonly, the cases were dismissed because the time limit for prosecution had been exceeded. In other cases, Berlusconi merely saw to it that the prosecuting judge was replaced by somebody more favourable to his interests.

In the meantime, Berlusconi's business empire, consisting of 150 companies, three private TV channels, radio stations, the country's

biggest advertising agency and publishing group, film marketing companies, production and rental companies, a cinema chain as well as involvement in banks and insurance, is notching up profits in the tens of billions. In 2006, Berlusconi taxable personal income amounted to 139 million euros - a five-fold increase over the previous year.

Politically, Berlusconi collaborates with the most right-wing elements in the country. The "People of Freedom" is an alliance of Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which is organizationally based on his business empire, and the Gianfranco Fini's National Alliance, which emerged from the fascist MSI. While Fini has officially dissociated himself and his supporters from the fascist tradition, avowed fascists such as the granddaughter of the Duce, Alessandra Mussolini, and the convicted businessman Giuseppe Ciarrapico are also standing as candidates for the PdL.

The most important ally of the PdL is the separatist Northern League (Lega Nord), whose racist and in particular anti-Muslim campaigns are on a par with those conducted by ultra-rightist organisations such as the German National Democratic Party (NPD), the French National Front or the Belgian Vlaams Belang.

Berlusconi has conducted a right-wing populist election campaign, combining self-adulation with the most primitive attacks on his opponents, including vulgar defamations of women.

Some opponents of Berlusconi, including some demoralized leftist intellectuals, blame the alleged backwardness of the masses for Berlusconi's potential return to power. Fausto Bertinotti, leading candidate of the Rainbow coalition, told European parliamentarians in Strasbourg, that the Italian right would win on the basis of "manipulation of the votes of those lacking any cultural roots."

Bertinotti, who for many years headed the organisation Refounded Communism (Rifondazione Comunista) neglects to mention his own political role. It is impossible to comprehend Berlusconi's return to political prominence without examining the role played by Rifondazione and all those European "lefts" who praised Bertinotti's party as a role model. They in fact bear the main responsibility for the resurgence of Berlusconi.

The Italian masses, which Bertinotti now declares to be culturally backward, during the past 15 years have continually stood up to the attacks launched by both right-wing and nominally "left" governments. The first government led by Berlusconi (1994-95) survived only a few months in office before being forced to resign after millions protested against attacks on pensions. These protests were followed by further strikes and demonstrations against welfare cuts, then the biggest demonstrations in the world against the Iraq war, protests against the G8 summit in Genoa, as well as strikes and demonstrations against the second Berlusconi government, which was finally voted out of office in 2006.

Rifondazione continually sought to place itself at the head of these movements in order to divert them into the harmless channels of bourgeois politics. It ensured that the working class - the healthiest element in Italian politics - was unable to play an independent political

role. In the 1990's, Rifondazione had already lent its parliamentary support to the "technocratic" governments led by the central bank heads Dini and Ciampi, as well as to the first government led by Prodi. In 2006, it then entered the second Prodi government, which implemented a pension reform at the expense of pensioners and shored up the budget by imposing drastic cuts in social spending.

During this period, Bertinotti assumed the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies - with corresponding remuneration. In 2006, his 233,000-euro annual salary made him the third-highest paid of the chamber's 630 parliamentarians.

The Prodi government was able to win support and recognition from European and international business circles with its ruthless austerity policies. It is noteworthy that a number of prominent international newspapers - including *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *The Times* and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* - have openly spoken out against a return to power by Berlusconi. They apparently have much more sympathy for the austerity policies of the so-called left than the right-wing alternative based on the accommodating the interests of a tiny clique.

For its part, the Italian population is far less well disposed towards the policies of the Prodi government. Poverty and unemployment are spreading rapidly. According to OECD figures, the average income in Italy ranks amongst the lowest in Europe. It is less than the average income in Greece and Spain, while price levels are amongst the highest in Europe. The newspaper *La Repubblica* summarized such findings recently with the headline: "German prices, Greek wages".

The rate of inflation in March (3.3 percent) was the highest in 12 years, and the population is suffering under rising prices for gasoline, pasta, bread and energy. Rents have become difficult to afford with many families forced to pay half their income for a roof over their heads. In particular, families complain that pay checks don't stretch to the end of the month.

These are the factors that led to the growing discontent with Prodi and opened the way for Berlusconi's political comeback — not the alleged backwardness of the masses. Lacking any internal strength, Berlusconi's resurgence is entirely bound up with the bankruptcy of the nominal "left".

Many of those who formerly voted for Prodi are expected to boycott the upcoming elections. This is demonstrated by the popularity of the comedian Beppe Grillo, who has publicly called for abstention and denounced both political camps as "suspected twin brothers" and "altar boys at the same celebration of mass", who are conducting a "phoney war". Grillo currently appears in packed arenas and halls with audiences of at least 3,000. In the space of a year, it is reckoned that he has performed before a million people. He has been banned from appearing on television.

The impotency of the Democrats

There is little substantive difference between the program of Berlusconi's PdL and that of Veltroni's Democrats. While Berlusconi promises to abolish taxes on houses and overtime, to build new dwellings for young couples and align pensions to the rising cost of living (combined with an increase in the working life), Veltroni promises income tax reductions, an annual bonus for children and the introduction of a minimum wage. In light of the country's high level of national debt and the ongoing effects of the international financial crisis, nobody in their right mind expects these promises to be fulfilled after the election.

The inability of the Democrats to take on Berlusconi is confirmed by Veltroni's election campaign. This former functionary of Italy's Communist Party, who has regrouped the most important components of

the former Prodi coalition into a new party based on the American Democrats, refuses to openly attack Berlusconi.

"We are different, we want to overcome the conflicts and polarization of the last 15 years," he reassures his audience in election meetings whenever tendencies hostile to Berlusconi emerge. Veltroni refrains from raising the issue of Berlusconi's exploitation of political influence to defend his business interests, and is even reluctant to mention the name of his adversary. Veltroni also remains deliberately vague on the content of his politics. His election meetings always end with the hollow slogan — popularised by his role model Barack Obama — "Yes we can! - Si può fare!" together with the singing of the Italian national anthem.

Veltroni's adaptation to Berlusconi has led a number of commentators to assume that Veltroni would be prepared to enter a coalition with the right wing if Berlusconi does not receive enough votes for outright victory. Even in the ranks of his own organisation, his supporters have warned that Veltroni's refusal to take on his opponent is denying the party any chance of victory. This was the accusation made by Franca Rame, a senator and the partner of the renowned Italian dramatist Dario Fo. Rame accused Veltroni of virtually shelving an election campaign directed against the right wing.

In order to prove his reliability to the country's bourgeois elite, Veltroni has rejected any co-operation with the former left wing of the Prodi coalition. This has led to the founding of the Rainbow Left (Sinistra Arcobaleno), an alliance of the Greens, Rifondazione Comunista, the Italian Communists and Democratic Left. Such a formation could perhaps more accurately be described as an alliance of dashed illusions.

The Rainbow Left has put forward its own 14-point program, which consists primarily of social demands. The organisation does not give the least explanation as to how such demands are to be implemented, nor does this grouping draw any sort of balance sheet of the Prodi government, which all of the component elements of the Rainbow Left supported.

The aim of the alliance is clearly to prevent the emergence of any independent opposition and provide support for a future Veltroni government, once the votes are counted. Bertinotti publicly declared that the short term goal of the Rainbow was to prevent "the victory of the right under Berlusconi's leadership" - a demand which amounts to implicit support for Veltroni. Originally, the alliance had been expected to win 15 percent of the vote, but recent polls forecast just seven percent for the alliance.

Irrespective of this weekend's result at the polls - either a victory for Berlusconi, a tie between the parties or a surprise victory for Veltroni - the election serves as a prelude to inevitable fierce class confrontations. The assumption of power by Berlusconi will elevate criminal and fascist elements directly into state leadership and pose a direct danger to the working class. A government led by Veltroni would continue the austerity course conducted by Prodi and intensify the social crisis.

The working class does not have an alternative in this election. It must take the road of developing its own independent party, which fights for a socialist transformation of Italian society.



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