

Collapse of “left” parties enables Berlusconi to win Italian election

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Just two years after being voted out of office, the media magnate Silvio Berlusconi will become head of the Italian government for a third time. His right-wing alliance “People of Freedom” (PdL—Popolo della Libertà) obtained a clear majority in both chambers of parliament in the elections held on Sunday and Monday.

With around 47 percent of the vote for both chambers, Berlusconi easily defeated his main rival, Walter Veltroni, who won just 38 percent.

Berlusconi has won 340 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, including the bonus allocated to the winning party, while Veltroni has only 241 seats. The Christian Democratic UDC, led by Pier Ferdinando Casini, which has close relations with the Vatican and stood independently from any other alliance, won 36 seats. In the Senate, Berlusconi will command 171 mandates as opposed to 130 for Veltroni and 2 for the UDC.

The election turnout of 80 percent was about 3 percent less than in the elections two years ago. In Italy, electoral participation is officially enforced by law, although no sanctions are imposed on those who do not bother to cast a ballot.

The election not only secured a majority for the right wing, but for the first time resulted in a political structure that—similar to the American system—consists of two major right-wing bourgeois parties. From a previous total of over twenty parties and groupings with parliamentary representation, just six were returned to parliament.

The two most important components of Berlusconi’s alliance, his own Forza Italia and the post-fascist National Alliance, led by Gianfranco Fini, established a joint list for the elections, and plan to unite shortly into one large right-wing party. In addition, the separatist Northern League and the relatively insignificant autonomy movement (Mpa—Movimento per Autonomia) stood as part of the “People of Freedom” alliance.

Prior to the election, Veltroni had united the Left Democrats (successor to the Communist Party), the Christian Democratic Margherita and several smaller groupings into the Democratic Party. The DP models itself after the American Democrats and advances a similar pro-business economic program. The only ally of the Democrats was the group “Italy of Values” (Italia dei Valori), led by the former anti-corruption judge Antonio Di

Pietro, which gained 5 percent of the total won by Veltroni’s camp.

Collapse of the Rainbow Left

Veltroni had refused to cooperate with the parties on the left wing of the previous government coalition led by Romano Prodi. These parties then, of necessity, established their own election alliance—the Rainbow Left (Sinistra arcobaleno). This alliance was made up of Refounded Communism (Rifondazione Comunista), the Greens, the Italian Communists (PdCI) and the Democratic Left (SD), a split-off from the former Left Democrats.

The Rainbow Left suffered the worst defeat in the election. At the time of its foundation, leaders of the alliance predicted it would garner around 15 percent of the vote. Opinion polls prior to the election put support for the alliance at 7 percent. In the event, the alliance won a little more than 3 percent—insufficient to enter parliament.

Rifondazione, formerly represented in both chambers of the parliament with over 40 delegates in each, was unable to defend a single seat. The newspaper *Repubblica* spoke of the result as a “veritable earthquake.”

The collapse of support for the so-called “left” becomes clearer when one looks at the results in some of its former strongholds. In Tuscany, Rifondazione won 8.2 percent in 2006, and together with the Greens and the PdCI picked up a total of 13.4 percent. In this election, the Rainbow Left received just 4.5 percent. In the region Emilia Romagna, the share of the vote that went to the Rainbow Left plummeted from 10 to 3 percent. In Latium (which includes Rome) the vote of the “left” parties comprising the Rainbow Left fell to 3.3 percent from 13 percent, while in Umbria it went from 12.7 to 3.5 percent.

The collapse of the “left” is crucial to any understanding of the election result. Since emerging from the break-up of the Italian Communist Party 17 years ago and absorbing a number of petty-bourgeois “left” groups along the way, Rifondazione called upon its supporters to back allegedly progressive

bourgeois governments. Time and time again it was Rifondazione that secured such governments a majority in parliament, until it directly entered into power in 2006 as part of the coalition led by Prodi. It continually justified its opportunism with the argument that it was necessary to back “the lesser evil” against the right wing.

The results of this type of politics have been disastrous. Rifondazione and its allies have effectively prevented the working class from developing its own independent political orientation. Instead, Rifondazione trotted tamely behind Prodi and his predecessors. In the current election, the organisation’s main role was to provide a left cover for Veltroni’s election campaign.

On this basis, the Rainbow Left were incapable of winning any serious support. The abysmal election result for the Rainbow Left is an expression of the fact that—after two years of the Prodi government—illusions have been dashed in the ability of such supposedly “left” reformist governments to resolve the country’s deepening economic and social crisis.

The economic situation in Italy has rapidly worsened. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Italian economy will barely grow this year, Italy’s share of world trade is declining, and wages are stagnating. Many Italians are so bad off they cannot afford to eat a meal of pasta every day. A layer of young adults has emerged whose economic situation is so precarious that they cannot risk starting a family.

Growing inflation and the stagnation of wages were central issues in the election campaign. Stinking piles of rubbish, which filled the streets of Naples for weeks and led to mass protests, became a symbol of an utterly corrupt and incompetent political elite motivated solely by personal advantage. The Berlusconi camp was able to exploit these issues, although the roots of the garbage scandal are to be found in Berlusconi’s own previous period in power.

The decrease in the election turnout is largely a result of abstention by disillusioned former supporters of the “left.” Other voters supported Berlusconi because they thought he might be more effective in tackling major issues than the hopelessly divided coalition led by Prodi.

An unstable government

In particular, the Northern League was able to profit from this state of affairs. Although it had gone through a prolonged crisis, the party, with its base in the wealthier north, was able to record its best ever election result and double its presence in both chambers of parliament.

With a national average of over 8 percent, the Northern League was able to guarantee Berlusconi’s election victory. In

fact, support for Berlusconi’s own list was somewhat reduced compared to two years previously. According to opinion polls, many industrial workers who had formerly supported the “left” switched to the Northern League. In highly industrialized Lombardy, the party emerged strongest, with 30 percent of the vote.

The politics of the Northern League combine propaganda against the central government in Rome with demands for more autonomy for the north and open xenophobia. The leader of the party, Umberto Bossi, declared at election meetings: “We have had enough of centralism from a predatory Rome.” As a result of disillusionment with the Prodi government, such slogans found support amongst certain layers.

The enhanced standing of the Northern League will, however, have a destabilizing impact on the new government. Differences between the separatist Northern League and the centralist National Alliance, which has its stronghold in the south of the country, are of a potentially explosive nature. Such differences contributed to the collapse of the first Berlusconi government in 1995. According to the *Corriere della Sera*, the demand of the Northern League for more decentralisation in regard to taxes will only deepen the already substantial gulf between the north and south of the country.

Of even more significance is the contradiction between the enormously tense social situation and the right-wing program of the new government, which will tend to make the new administration extremely unstable. Most commentators, including those from the right, are united in this assessment.

The Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* points out that Berlusconi “in contrast to Prodi, will not inherit an economic upturn, but rather persistent stagnation, if not an actual recession. This will make it extremely difficult for him to fulfil the bold promises he made in the election campaign.”

The *Financial Times Deutschland* warns under the headline “Italy—Tragedy, Third Act”: “Catastrophic growth figures, pre-modern productivity rates and a monstrous state deficit are risk factors for the domestic market and the eurozone. Berlusconi will never undertake the difficult reforms necessary to defuse the risks.”

Looming social conflicts are also behind Berlusconi’s offer on the evening of the election to cooperate with Veltroni, despite Berlusconi’s clear majority. “We are ready to work on reforms together with the opposition,” Berlusconi said, adding, “We have difficult months before us which call for great efforts.”



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