

Italy: Berlusconi's new government promotes xenophobia

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Nicolo Tommasoli was buried in the city of Verona last Saturday. The 29-year-old had been beaten to death on May 1 by neo-Nazis. A silent crowd of over 300 mourners escorted his coffin to the grave. In accordance with the wishes of his parents and fiancée, politicians and the press were excluded from Tommasoli's funeral service.

On the evening of May 1, Nicolo was abused in the centre of Verona by a group of known thugs from the skinhead and neo-Nazi scene. When he refused to give them a cigarette they beat him to the ground and repeatedly kicked his head and body with their boots. His injuries were so severe that he never recovered.

One week after the assault, on May 8, Tommasoli died. On the same day Silvio Berlusconi presented the cabinet of his fourth government to the public. Even if the two events have no direct connection it is no accident that they took place almost virtually at the same time. Right-wing extremist thugs have been emboldened by the return of the right wing to power.

During recent months there has been a notable increase of right-wing violence in Italy, and the activities of neo-fascist elements in connection with soccer games is commonplace. In Rome right-wing extremists attacked Romanians with clubs and knives following a deadly attack carried out on a young Italian woman. A restaurant frequented by homosexuals was also attacked.

In the town of Verona, where the latest cowardly murder took place, Flavio Tosi, a member of the separatist Northern League, was elected mayor one year ago. This was despite Tosi's previous conviction for "incitement to racial hatred." Since his election the activities of skinhead groups and right-wing thugs have escalated.

Gianfranco Fini, who heads the post-fascist National Alliance and is the new president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, played down the murder in Verona, which he declared was less reprehensible than the actions of radical leftists in Turin. During May Day celebrations in Turin, protesters burned the Israeli and US flags in order to demonstrate against the participation of Israel at the Turin book fair. Fini declared on television that this was "much worse than what took place in Verona."

In the recent federal election campaign, the billionaire and media tsar Berlusconi formed a pact with openly neo-fascist and racist parties, and his new government sworn in last Thursday is determined to follow the xenophobic course he pursued in the election campaign.

The new government is characterised by two essential traits. On the one hand, it consists of close followers of Berlusconi—some newspapers refer to a "Praetorian guard" and compare Berlusconi in this respect to Vladimir Putin, the Russian former president and a personal friend. On the other hand, Berlusconi has awarded prominent positions to xenophobic politicians, including some who were

previously forced to resign posts because of their publicly pronounced racist sentiments.

The most important ministries are occupied by figures who have already filled key positions in former governments and some of whom have maintained close relations with the media magnate since the start of his career. In addition he has included a number of younger ministers, who are notable only for their unconditional allegiance to Berlusconi. Members of this later group are the 38-year-old justice minister from Sicily, Angelino Alfano, and 32-year-old Mara Carfagna, who is in charge of women's issues. Carfagna made her career on Berlusconi's television channels and once hit headlines for her role in a marriage crisis involving the head of the government.

Berlusconi made clear that he would personally make all important government decisions. "If necessary, I will decide alone," he declared, and in this respect he appears to have taken a leaf from the book of the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted: "He has little time for structures aimed at controlling power in a parliamentary constitutional state—such as opposition, law and a pluralist media."

The xenophobic orientation of the new government is underlined by the appointment of Roberto Maroni as interior minister. Maroni is a member of the Northern League and was minister for social affairs and labour in the last Berlusconi government.

Maroni plans to submit a draft law to the cabinet this Friday aimed at combating crime and illegal immigration. The law will convert existing refugee camps into a form of prison for illegal immigrants, where they can be held for up to 18 months. The new interior minister also wants to get rid of the slums on the outskirts of Rome and suspend the European Union Schengen agreement, which regulates the dismantling of border controls inside the EU.

Berlusconi dreamed up a special new ministry for Roberto Calderoli—also a member of the Northern League. He has been appointed "minister for the simplification of laws." Calderoli was "reform minister" in a previous Berlusconi government, but was forced to resign following an anti-Islam provocation on his part. He appeared on television wearing a T-shirt featuring one of the controversial Mohammed cartoons. His action led to protests in Libya in which 11 people lost their lives.

Calderoli is notorious for his racist rants against immigrants, homosexuals and Italians from the poor south of the country. On one occasion he told immigrants to go "into the desert and talk with the camels, or into the jungle and dance with the apes." He also publicly called for the navy to shoot at African refugee boats in the Mediterranean. His return to a government post is a deliberate act of provocation.

The head of the Northern League, Umberto Bossi, also has a post in the new government. Bossi is responsible for statements such as: "Illegal immigrants must be hunted, either in a friendly or a hostile manner. At some point there comes a moment when force must be used." As "minister for federal reform" Bossi will be responsible for the growing independence of Italy's wealthier northern regions from its poor south. This was always one of the most important goals of the Northern League.

Bossi lacks his own minister portfolio, however. This is a precautionary measure by Berlusconi aimed at defusing potentially explosive differences within the coalition. Time and time again Bossi has come into conflict with the National Alliance over the issue of separatism for the north.

The new foreign minister is Franco Frattini (Forza Italia), the former EU justice commissioner. For years Frattini has been urging the EU to seal its external borders against "illegal immigration." In the Milan newspaper *IL Giornale*, which belongs to Berlusconi, Frattini called for a law to force immigrants to leave the country within 90 days if they cannot prove they have a certain minimum income. The proposal is primarily directed against poor immigrants from Romania and openly challenges the open border policy of the EU.

The finance minister is Giulio Tremonti (Forza Italia), who filled this post in the last Berlusconi government. He is regarded as an especially close confidante of Berlusconi. He issued a tax law in 1994 that favoured Berlusconi's media empire.

Tremonti will be responsible for the attacks of the new government on the working class. Berlusconi wants to penalise so-called "Fanulloni" (those who do not pay tax) in the public service, raise the retirement age and abolish the taxes paid by companies on overtime worked by their employees. These are some of the immediate measures planned by the new government.

The Italian business association Confindustria, which formerly backed the government of Romano Prodi, has welcomed the new government. Its president, Fiat boss Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, called upon the country's trade unions to finally open their eyes and ditch outdated practices such as strikes, which he said are "thoroughly fractious and expensive both for workers and companies."

Finance Minister Tremonti, who is regarded as a leading ideologist of Berlusconi's party, caused a furore in the election campaign with his recent book *Fear and Hope*. In the book he ridiculed the "insanity of globalization," which is the work of "fanatics" and has led to price explosions, financial crises, environment disasters and geopolitical tensions. Tremonti described "free-market domination" as the "last ideological insanity of the 20th century." He called upon Europe to slap penalties on Asian imports and exclude foreign funds from European financial markets.

Tremonti's book led to fears by European business circles that Italy could take a protectionist course, which could eventually threaten the unity of the European Union. The French president Sarkozy, whom Berlusconi admires, is also in favour of protectionist measures to protect French economic interests.

In the first place, however, Tremonti's demagogic attacks on globalisation and the free market are an expression of the contradiction that lies at the heart of the new government. It represents the interests of the privileged and the super-rich, a cynical and corrupt layer who have made unparalleled fortunes from the opening of financial markets.

But because the government has no answer to the problems of the working population—rising prices, increasing poverty amongst

pensioners, youth unemployment, low-wage work, mounds of garbage in Naples, etc.—it has taken up nationalist and racist propaganda in a thoroughly shameless manner in order to divert attention from the country's social problems. The 650,000 immigrants—who work without valid papers as domestic helpers, carers of children and the elderly, reap the Italian harvest or work in industry for cheap wages—are to be treated as scapegoats.

This campaign has had a certain success only due to the complete political bankruptcy of the country's so-called left. The outgoing Prodi government, which was backed by all those organizations to emerge from the former Communist Party, carried out policies directed against the interests of the working population. The working class paid for Prodi's reorganisation of the state budget with declining wages and lower pensions. They provided the Italian soldiers who were sent by Prodi to Afghanistan and Lebanon and paid the taxes used to finance increasing militarism.

All of these measures were supported by the parties of the so-called left, who argued that they were the only way to prevent a return to power by Berlusconi. A particularly cynical role in this charade was played by the organisation Communist Refoundation (*Rifondazione Comunista*), which, like the Left Party in Germany, made left-sounding noises while supporting a right-wing government.

The result of this policy is now visible for everyone to see. It created a political vacuum, which could be exploited by the right with its racist demagoguery.

At the same time the country is torn apart by growing inequality, and new social confrontations are inevitable. This point was made at the end of April by the German magazine *Der Spiegel*: "It is completely open as to how social discontent, 'unpopular measures' and economic crises will express themselves in the new political constellation. One fears an extra-parliamentary movement and illegal strikes."

In order to prepare for such an eventuality Berlusconi intends to follow the model of Sarkozy and use the services of the opposition parties. In his deliberately moderately toned government statement, Berlusconi offered the chance of dialogue and cooperation over issues such as constitutional reforms and changes to the state apparatus. Opposition leader Walter Veltroni has already signalled his agreement. He called Berlusconi's list of ministers a "severe disappointment," but in the same breath promised to cooperate with the new government over "state reform" and the "budget."



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