

# Former fascist elected mayor of Rome

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Two weeks after the victory of Silvio Berlusconi in the Italian parliamentary elections, the city of Rome, which for decades has been governed by centre-left parties, has fallen into the hands of the right wing. On April 28, Gianni Alemanno, a long-time member of the fascist movement with close links to prominent right-wing extremists, was elected mayor of the Italian capital.

In the mid-1990s, Alemanno had participated in the so-called “Fiuggi turn,” whereby a majority of Italian neo-fascists distanced themselves from the cult surrounding the figure of former fascist dictator Benito Mussolini and founded the National Alliance (NA) based on “national conservative” values. Nevertheless, when Alemanno’s victory was announced at the start of the week, his supporters responded in a manner powerfully evoking Italy under the dictator Mussolini. Chanting “Duce, Duce” they celebrated their so-called “liberation of Rome” by giving fascist salutes in front of the city’s town hall. Mussolini’s granddaughter, Alessandra Mussolini, was jubilant because the election of Alemanno took place exactly 63 years after the shooting of her grandfather by anti-fascist partisans.

As a youth, the now 50-year-old Gianni Alemanno had joined the “youth front” of the fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) and had a reputation for hooliganism in his activities as a fascist ringleader. In 1988, he took over the leadership of the youth front from Gianfranco Fini, who today heads the NA. Alemanno is married to the daughter of Pino Rautis, who founded the MSI in 1946 and went on to set up the extreme-right terrorist organization Ordine Nuovo (New Order) in 1956. Today he leads his own ultra-right grouping.

Unlike his father-in-law, Alemanno joined the NA in 1994, but he always belonged to the organisation’s right wing—the so-called Destra Social (Social Right). The most important representative of Destra Sociale, Francesco Storace, has since split with the NA to form another ultra-right party, La Destra (The Right). La Destra supported Alemanno’s election campaign in Rome.

Between 2001 and 2006, Alemanno was also secretary

of agriculture in Silvio Berlusconi’s second government.

Although Alemanno trailed behind the candidate of the newly formed Democratic Party, Francesco Rutelli, in the first round of voting, he was able to emerge victorious in the second ballot held last weekend with a surprisingly comfortable lead of 53.7 to 46.3 percent of the vote. The election turnout of 63 percent was over 10 percent lower than in the first ballot, which had taken place at the same time as the parliamentary elections.

As is the case with the reelection of Silvio Berlusconi as head of government 14 days ago, this latest result raises a serious question: How is it possible for a fascist politician such as Gianni Alemanno to be elected as mayor of Rome, which is both the Italian capital and a leading European cultural metropolis?

Immediately after the election the defeated opposition candidate, Francesco Rutelli, blamed a general “turn to the right” by the population for his defeat. In reality, the answer lies with his own policies.

For years the politicians now leading the Democratic Party have unquestioningly implemented pro-business policies and therefore bear responsibility for the city’s increasing social polarization. In the course of their decades in power they were able to rely on political support from such organisations as Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation), while the right wing was able to demagogically exploit the fears and worries of the population. This same process resulted in the government led by Romano Prodi being voted out after just two years in office. Now the consequences for Rome have been even more dramatic.

Rome, with its population of 2.7 million, has been governed for the past 15 years by administrations led by the two most important figures in the new Democratic Party, Francesco Rutelli and Walter Veltroni. Rutelli, leader of the Christian-democratic alliance Margherita, was mayor from 1993 to 2001. Veltroni, a long-time functionary of the now defunct Italian Communist Party, then a leading member of the Left Democrats, was mayor from 2001 to 2008. Then following an initiative by

Veltroni, the Left Democrats united with Margherita to form the Democratic Party last year.

Both Rutelli and Veltroni had won international praise for their work in improving the ambience of the “eternal city” by modernizing the city’s traffic system and restoring the city’s outstanding cultural heritage. Veltroni was at home amongst cinema and artistic circles and even founded Rome’s own film festival in 2006.

But above all, it was tourists and the city’s own upper-middle classes who were able to profit from such policies. On the fringes of society and in the suburbs outside of the immediate city centre, hundreds of thousands were condemned to a struggle to survive—employed in low-paid, so-called precarious jobs, while food and energy prices have risen dramatically. Less well-off families confront declining education and training opportunities for their children and are forced to pay high rents for unhealthy and small dwellings. The elderly are forced to eke out their retirement with miserly pensions made even worse by inflation. In the meantime, the crisis of the “quarta settimana”—the fourth week of the month when the family purse is empty—has become widespread.

Rome has undergone an unprecedented social decline during the past 15 years. Soup kitchens have registered a sharp growth in poverty, with many single pensioners dependent on handouts and unable to survive on the minimum pension of €500 per month. An estimated 10,000 lack any proper accommodations, with around 4,000 living directly on the streets. The newspaper *Repubblica* writes: “The new poor are spreading both geographically and numerically and can be found on river banks, railway embankments and in barracks, tents and corrugated sheet dwellings under motorway bridges.”

Above all, there is a lack of reasonably paid jobs for young people. According to a report by the Caritas welfare organisation, around one third of those who receive food packages in the centre of Rome are between 18 and 35 years of age and have no income, although many of them have a good education or university degree. There is also a marked increase in the number of entire families coming to the welfare centres.

Under these conditions, Gianni Alemanno has been able to profit from social discontent and frustration. In his populist campaign he promised all manner of things: “We will free Rome of fear, decline and poverty,” he proclaimed, and among his list of promises was an increase in pensions.

He also sought to demagogically exploit the appalling living conditions in many of the city’s suburbs, where

large numbers of immigrants lacking proper residency permits live in slums. In playing the nationalist and racist card, Alemanno singled out immigrants from Romania, particularly Sinti and Roma, calling for the deportation of “20,000 criminal foreigners.”

On this issue he was able to rely on the backing of the Democrats. Instead of addressing the urgent social questions that underlie the tensions between different nationalities, the Democrats joined in the anti-immigrant chorus. It was no less a figure than Walter Veltroni who had pressurised the Prodi government to pass a decree for the classification of all European Union citizens who constituted “a threat to public security.” And for his part, Francesco Rutelli reacted to his defeat by declaring that the problem was that the “left” had not been able to dominate in the debate over security issues.

There had been a similar reaction in the case of the former trade union secretary and role model of Italian petty-bourgeois radical circles, Sergio Cofferati, who after being elected mayor of Bologna launched a draconian law-and-order campaign aimed at ridding the city of immigrants.

There can be no doubt that the policies of the government led by Romano Prodi also played a role in the election results in Rome. Both Veltroni and Rutelli are directly identified with the Prodi administration. Rutelli was culture minister and vice-prime minister in the Prodi government, and Veltroni was expected to take over Prodi’s political role as leader of the Democrats. Just two years ago, Veltroni won over 60 percent of the vote in the first round of the Rome elections, soundly defeating Alemanno. Now positions have been reversed in the election held last weekend.



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