

Italy: Berlusconi government steps up its attacks on Roma and foreigners

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Silvio Berlusconi has now governed Italy for two months. The multi-billionaire media magnate enjoys a clear parliamentary majority following the humiliating election defeat of all those organisations which emerged from the former Italian Communist Party—in particular Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista).

Berlusconi's right-wing coalition, consisting of his own Forza Italia, the post-fascist National Alliance led by Gianfranco Fini, and the separatist Northern League of Umberto Bossi, has already moved into action and passed a number of significant laws. It has introduced repressive anti-immigration measures, forcibly deported poor immigrants, opened the way for the use of the Italian army for domestic purposes and agreed on Italy's return to nuclear energy. At the same time Berlusconi has introduced a new immunity law which exempts him from legal prosecution.

The opposition is either paralysed, watches passively or joins in this offensive, as is the case of Walter Veltroni who evidently still retains hopes of being allowed to co-govern as part of a grand coalition of political parties.

At the end of last week, Interior Minister Roberto Maroni, chairman of the parliamentary group of the Northern League, announced the latest measure to be agreed by the government: a file is to be drawn up, particularly for Sinti and Roma, containing a DNA data base with digital fingerprints and photos of each individual. The file is to be extended to small children. In order to implement this data base, the government reactivated a fascist law from 1941.

The interior minister justifies the proposal with the argument that Roma children had to be subordinated to national control since they were used by their parents for the purpose of begging. "In a contravention of accepted norms we will also take prints from children in order to prevent such occurrences as begging," Maroni declared.

In their election campaign earlier this year, Berlusconi and his allies had already made clear their intention of deporting tens of thousands of Roma back to Romania and former Yugoslavia.

The measure has been fiercely criticized by human right organizations and the Council of Europe. In an obvious reference to the racist laws implemented by the fascists, Secretary-General of the Council of Europe Terry Davis declared: "This proposal invites historical analogies which are so obvious that they do not even have to be spelled out." He appealed for "democracy in Italy and its authorities" to stop the law.

Representatives from Amnesty International, the Anti-Defamation League and UNICEF were even more explicit. Luciano Scagliotti from the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) said that every type of "law or measure, which is justified on the basis of ethnic origin" had to be condemned. "It is exactly the same as the way in which Jews were registered by the Nazis in 1938."

The registration of Roma is only the latest in a series of repressive measures against immigrants. The government has already passed a law which makes entry into Italy without proper identification papers a crime.

In the middle of June the Senate also adopted a package of security laws, which included setting up a DNA data base and the arrest of so called "illegal" immigrants for a period of up to 18 months detention, as well as their speedy deportation.

Since May of this year, on the basis of "public security concerns", the state has undertaken a systematic round up of foreigners from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, North Africa and China. The housing quarters of Roma have been forcibly vacated by police, as was the case in Rome, or burnt down by an agitated mob in Naples where the criminal Camorra played a key role.

With his vicious "campaign against criminal foreigners", Berlusconi is seeking to divert attention from the severe social problems plaguing the country. The working population is faced with declining living standards, under conditions where many young people face unemployment or work in a precarious job for a wage insufficient to live on. Rapidly rising energy and food prices have led to the growing impoverishment of broad layers. In June inflation rose to 3.8 percent—the highest level for twelve years. Especially hard hit are the elderly.

The Berlusconi government is systematically preparing for violent confrontations by beefing up the powers of the state. He has already used the accumulation of waste in Naples as an excuse to deploy the Italian army for domestic purposes, which until now was unconstitutional.

Waste collection in Naples is largely in the hands of the Camorra. While this mafia-type organization, also known as O Sistema, carries out illegal operations such as smuggling, extortion, prostitution, money laundering and trading in drugs it is also awarded official transactions from the state. Businesses can save waste disposal costs when they hand over the problem to the Camorra, which merely dumps the waste on illegal tips in the south of the country.

The population of Naples has been confronted with piles of rubbish on their streets since November 2007. Not infrequently these mounds of combustible garbage explode into flames. The Berlusconi government came to power promising to overcome the garbage crisis. It is now responding to the problem by deploying the Italian army against those layers of the population who have protested against the dangers of contamination from the poisonous garbage.

Shortly after assuming office, the government declared the dumping grounds to be a military restricted area in order to prevent citizens from undertaking further protest. At the same time it announced plans to set up four incineration plants. It is assumed that these plants will also be controlled by the Camorra.

One of these plants is to be built in the proximity of the Vesuvius in the Zona Flegrea, a cultural and recreational area on the Gulf of Naples. Another plant is to be set up in Chiaiano just a few hundred meters away from the local hospital in a working class region with a population of 250,000. This plant will inevitably have severe consequences for the rural character of the area, well known for its herds of sheep, beekeeping and cherry tree orchards.

Protests against the planned incineration plants have already been mounted. On May 23, two days after the first cabinet meeting of the new government which Berlusconi had switched to Naples, violent protests took place in Chiaiano. The government reacted brutally, but was only able to contain the situation after two days. Many protesters were injured and arrested. Since then the area has been under heavy military and police guard.

Berlusconi has threatened to directly deploy the army in Chiaiano and in Agnano, where protests also took place. The military is already located in the region and ready to intervene. Guido Bertolaso, who was appointed to resolve the garbage crisis, told the Austrian *Standard* newspaper that the army is “in continuous use in order to free the streets from garbage”.

The government is acting just as irresponsibly and undemocratically over energy policy as it has done with regard to the garbage crisis. It has issued a government decree without any parliamentary debate aimed at the reintroduction of nuclear power.

Following the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster, the Italian electorate opted out of nuclear power in a referendum held more than twenty years ago. Now the government has abruptly announced plans to reintroduce nuclear power, which it maintains will counter rising energy prices and free the country from its dependence on oil supplies from Libya and Russia.

In the newspaper *Il manifesto*, Massimo Serafini commented, “A handful of politicians needed just a few minutes to revoke a popular vote which decided by overwhelming majority to put an end to this uncertain technology involving radioactive waste, which only the Camorra or the manufacturers of nuclear bombs know how to get rid of. I ask myself into what circle of hell this country has descended and what it has done to deserve a ruling class which regards a camp for Roma as more dangerous for the population than nuclear power plants?”

It comes as no surprise that Berlusconi used his first weeks in power to return to his war against the Italian judiciary. He has resumed his former project of establishing immunity from prosecution for leading politicians and himself above all. Such immunity for politicians had been abolished in the 1990s following the *Mani Pulite* (clean hands) campaign against corruption in the state and business circles.

The first package of laws dealing with internal security pushed through by the Senate in the middle of June already contains an *ad personam* clause, the so-called “Lex Berlusconi”. This clause states that all trials dealing with offences committed before the middle of 2002 are to be postponed for one year. The only exceptions are offences involving organized crime, industrial accidents or criminal offences with possible prison sentences of ten or more years. The clause means that an important trial currently being conducted against Berlusconi will be suspended for one year.

The trial against Berlusconi has already entered its concluding phase. Berlusconi is accused alongside the former British lawyer, David Mills, the husband of Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell. Berlusconi is alleged to have paid \$600,000 (380,000 euros) in bribes to Mills to illicit false testimonies relating to two trials held at the end of the 1990s. The prime minister faces a possible six-year prison sentence.

Berlusconi is intent on passing a new version of the immunity law for prominent state functionaries, which had been struck out by Italy’s highest constitutional court four years ago. The “Lodo Schifani”, named after Renato Schifani (Forza Italia), the current president of the Italian Senate, would suspend all legal proceedings against the five highest representatives of the state—the president, the prime minister, the presidents of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies and the president of the Constitutional Court.

The law is a blank cheque for Berlusconi, who has been charged on no less than 12 separate occasions, accused of falsifying his books, perjury, tax evasion and bribery. On three separate occasions he was found guilty

and sentenced to a total of six years’ detention. In every case, he was able to successfully appeal against the judgements.

In justifying the new law Berlusconi told his cabinet, “Either I play the role of president of the council or I dedicate my time to preparing for the trials against me. Both together is not possible.”

Predictably his cabinet agreed to the new immunity law, which is to be submitted to both chambers of the Italian parliament.

The forerunner of this law, the “Lodo Maccanico Schifani”, was originally drafted by Antonio Maccanico, a deputy of the Margherita party, which was allied with Romano Prodi. Five years ago, in June 2003, the law—including the changes added by Renato Schifani—was passed by Berlusconi and approved by parliament. In January 2004, however, it was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court which argued it contravened the constitutional clause stipulating the equality of all citizens before the law.

The Supreme Judicial Council (CSM) has once again declared it will oppose the latest immunity law, which it also regards as unconstitutional. The judicial council pointed out that the “Lex Berlusconi” had already resulted in the freezing of tens of thousands of trials.

The stance adopted by the CSM led to another violent outburst by Berlusconi. In front of a meeting of business leaders last week, he angrily condemned “political judges” as the “metastases of democracy”. In an earlier outburst Berlusconi had denounced Italian judges as “mad twice over” and “mentally disturbed”.

The Italian President Giorgio Napolitano has expressed his concern over the renewed outbreak of hostilities between the government and the judiciary and called for “constructive dialogue” between the different camps, including dialogue with the parliamentary opposition led by Veltroni.

In light of the naked racism, the vicious attacks on the independence of the judiciary and the nepotism which lies at the heart of the Berlusconi government it is appropriate to describe the current regime as the “underworld in power”. The fact that this criminal gang is able to assume power for a third time is entirely because of the political rottenness of the so-called “left” parties.

The outgoing Prodi government, which comprised a coalition extending from the former Christian Democrats to Communist Refoundation, consistently implemented the demands made by international finance circles against the working class. It maintained Italy’s militarist foreign policy despite broad popular opposition and completely discredited itself within the space of two years. Now, having elevated Berlusconi back to power, it has refrained from putting up the slightest opposition.

So far there has been barely a word of criticism directed against Berlusconi’s escapades from the leader of the official opposition, Veltroni, head of the Democratic Party (DP)—the biggest centre-left grouping in Italy. As a result Veltroni’s star is sinking rapidly in the eyes of the electorate. The party, which was founded just ten months ago from a union of the Left Democrats and the Christian-democratic Margherita, is already deeply divided. At a recent party congress former Prime Minister Romano Prodi’s defence secretary, Arturo Parisi, went so far as to call for Veltroni’s resignation.

Then on July 1 the former Communist Party newspaper *Unità* published an open letter from Antonio Di Pietro, the leader of the party Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values), addressed to Veltroni. The former public prosecutor called on Veltroni to take part in a joint demonstration on July 8 in Rome to protest against Berlusconi’s immunity law. At the start of the 1990s Di Pietro led the *Mani Pulite* campaign, which led to the downfall of the old party system dominated by the Christian Democrats.

Veltroni, however, is opposed to protesting the immunity law and told the *Repubblica* newspaper that he is prepared to agree to immunity from prosecution for leading politicians. He is evidently of the opinion that his own political camp could profit from such a law.

In their years of government both Veltroni and Prodi refrained from undertaking any measures to challenge the corrupt network of media, finance and political interests which the Berlusconi empire embodies. Instead they created the conditions for Berlusconi's return to power by implementing drastic austerity measures at expense of the working population coupled with broad attacks on democratic and social rights. Now both men are adamantly opposed to any broad mobilization of the population that would inevitably also develop into an offensive against the opposition parties.

The role of Veltroni and Prodi is particularly evident in Naples. The current president of the Campania region is Antonio Bassolino, a former mayor of Naples. Bassolino is a member of the Democratic Party and a former member of the Italian Communist Party and was instrumental in facilitating the garbage drama in Naples. For a period he was even appointed the government's special commissioner to deal with the garbage crisis.

A special responsibility for the return of Berlusconi to power lies with Communist Refoundation which provided a left cover for the Prodi government. In so doing the organization lost any shred of its former popular support. Following the federal election in April, the party failed to win enough votes to re-enter parliament.

When Interior Minister Maroni recently announced his plans for a file on Roma he was roundly denounced by Prodi's former social minister, Paolo Ferrero, the chairman of Communist Refoundation. Ferrero lashed out at the "fascist methods" of the Berlusconi government and told the media, "I will personally stand in the queue to let them also take my fingerprints".

His theatrics are aimed at diverting attention away from his own record. Ferrero was Communist Refoundation's only minister in Prodi's cabinet. For two years the party supported Prodi's attacks on the working class and, with Ferrero's agreement, issued a deportation decree aimed at Romanian and Yugoslav Roma. The lists for deportation were already being drawn up last November. Berlusconi only needed to pull them out of the drawer and set them into motion.



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