

Italian government imposes national state of emergency

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On July 25, the Italian government headed by Silvio Berlusconi proclaimed a national state of emergency due to the continuing inflow of refugees by boat from across the Mediterranean Sea. This means that the state of emergency already imposed on Italy's three southernmost provinces—Sicily, Apulia and Calabria—will be expanded to encompass the entire country.

In 2002, during his second term in office, Berlusconi had already introduced a so-called “refugee state of emergency” in the south, which was continued in 2006 by the government led by Romano Prodi. Prodi also imposed a “water state of emergency” in May 2007 and somewhat later a “garbage state of emergency” in Naples. The current national state of emergency, however, has assumed new and alarming dimensions.

Since taking office three months ago, Berlusconi's government has systematically undertaken a series of harsh measures against immigrants and refugees, intensified security laws and decrees and facilitated assaults and acts of violence against what the government terms “illegal immigrants”. This campaign has seen the burning down of a Roma camp in Naples while the local authorities looked on. With its proclamation of a national state of emergency, the government has now made provisions for the introduction of extensive police-state powers.

The Italian parliament did not participate in the decision, but was presented with a fait accompli. Deputies only learned of the newly imposed state of emergency from newspaper reports. Interior Minister Roberto Maroni (Northern League) then explained the measure to deputies in the lower house last Tuesday. The chairman of the house is Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the “post-fascist” National Alliance.

Maroni justified the state of emergency with reference to the “continuous and unusual influx of non-European Union citizens”. He then cynically claimed that the government would use its powers to “better assist the illegal immigrants by accommodating them in buildings rather than tents, and guarantee them more humane treatment”.

Maroni's real plan is to incarcerate the largest possible number of refugees in the shortest period of time. He confirmed a plan to double the number of internment camps and convert former barracks across the country into so-called “identification and classification centres”. These prisons will serve to implement the newly introduced security laws, which make “illegal immigration” a criminal offence. “Offenders” can be held for up to 18 months.

On the same day, Defence Secretary Ignazio La Russa of the National Alliance made clear that these camps will be guarded in the future by regular army soldiers. Last Wednesday, he signed a decree which, beginning on August 4, permits the use of 3,000 soldiers for

domestic purposes. One thousand soldiers are to be deployed at the internment camps. An additional thousand are to be posted at sensitive public places (train stations, embassies, St. Peter's Cathedral, etc.), and the rest assigned to street patrols alongside ordinary policemen.

The defence secretary declared that the soldiers will be allowed to arrest suspects “caught in the act of committing a crime”. He added, “I have imposed the foot patrols ... The young soldiers are very experienced, they have been used in peace missions where they are confronted with situations which are more problematic than those to be found in our cities.”

In other words, sections of the army are being deployed in the country's cities who have already served and been brutalised by combat and civil war situations in Afghanistan, Lebanon or even Iraq. They are now being mobilised to serve in the cities of Milan, Rome, Naples, Padua and Verona. The deployment of troops for the rest of this year will cost over 31 million euros.

Ignazio Maria La Russa, whose middle name, Benito, is the same as that of the former Italian fascist dictator, Mussolini, is both defence secretary and president of the National Alliance, which is part of Berlusconi's “People of Liberty” alliance. Like his father, La Russa was active in the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) before taking an active role in transforming the MSI into the National Alliance.

La Russa hit the headlines two weeks ago with his proposal to fingerprint all of Italy's inhabitants. The Italian Interior Ministry had been sharply reprimanded by the European parliament because it had begun systematically gathering the fingerprints of Sinti and Roma—including children. The European parliament called this measure an “act of discrimination based on race and ethnic origin”.

La Russa then reacted with his cynical proposal. “Let's do it this way: we decide a law, which envisages taking all fingerprints ... in order to dissociate us from the slightest suspicion of racism. In the course of implementation priorities will be established and it could be that we find the fingerprints of Roma children amongst the most urgent cases.”

Although the recent government measures represent a threat to the rights of the entire Italian population, there has been a complete lack of principled resistance to the measures by the country's political opposition.

The Democratic Party, headed by former member of the Italian Communist Party Walter Veltroni, has said little about the government's measures. Leading party members have merely noted that the presence of soldiers in the country's historical town centres at the peak of the vacation season could harm Italy's image amongst tourists.

Former public prosecutor Antonio di Pietro (Italy of Values) explained that the problems of public security were due to cuts in the police budget. The recently approved measures, he said, were as likely to succeed as an attempt to “wash one’s face with dirty water”. Instead, Di Pietro would like to tackle the problem on the basis of previous police methods, without resorting to such drastic measures as the deployment of the army in public places and on the streets.

The leaders of Communist Refoundation also played down the issue and failed to exhibit any real interest in the fate of immigrants and refugees. Paolo Ferrero, who recently succeeded Fausto Bertinotti and Franco Giordano as party secretary of Communist Refoundation, explained that the imposition of the state of emergency was “a diversion to distract Italians from the consequences of government measures, which are crippling the country and its weakest layers”. For his part Nichi Vendola, president of the region of Apulia and prominent member of Communist Refoundation rejected the emergency measures in radical tones as “a further piece of fascism”.

What both men conceal is the fact that Communist Refoundation bears a large share of responsibility for the current situation. For two years (2006-2008), Communist Refoundation was part of the Prodi government, which issued its own decree for the deportation of all those who allegedly represented “a danger to the public order”. It was the first administration to draw up lists of Romanian Roma for possible deportation. At the time, Paolo Ferrero, a Communist Refoundation minister in the Prodi government, publicly defended the decrees against Sinti and Roma passed in November 2007.

In order to take part in the government, Communist Refoundation supported a host of shameful measures implemented by the Prodi cabinet, including an austerity program aimed at rescuing the state budget, military missions in Afghanistan and Lebanon, the expansion of the American military basis at Vicenza, and increases to the country’s defence budget. Communist Refoundation agreed to every measure—reeling out its standard argument that supporting Prodi was the only way to prevent Berlusconi from returning to power. The cost of all of these measures was footed by the working population.

This consequence of this policy was a historical debacle for the Prodi regime and Communist Refoundation. In elections held in the spring of 2008, Communist Refoundation lost over two and a half million votes and all of its seats in parliament. The path was then clear for a return to power by the alliance of right-wing parties led by Silvio Berlusconi.

The measures of the Berlusconi government are directed not only against immigrants, but also against poor Italians. This is made clear by an auxiliary motion regarding measures to “combat poverty” put forward by the Northern League, which is also part of Berlusconi’s coalition.

The Northern League submitted a proposal whereby the basic social security supplement (INPS) of 400 euros given to all poor people be paid in the future only to those who have worked at least ten years in Italy and paid social security contributions. The purpose of this measure is to exclude payment to immigrants.

When it was revealed that the proposal by the Northern League would also affect up to 800,000 pensioners, housewives, elderly monks and nuns and other Italian citizens, the press responded by declaring the suggestion was merely an embarrassing mistake.

In fact it reveals the class character of the government’s policies, which are directed in the first place against defenceless layers of the population who lack any lobby, but also serve as preparation for a frontal attack against the entire working population.

The government can offer no solution to the problems that really affect the population: rising prices, pensioner poverty, youth unemployment, insecure living conditions, the garbage crisis, etc. Contrary to the fulsome promises made by Berlusconi in his election campaign, the economic situation of the country has only worsened dramatically.

The country is on the brink of stagflation, or a combination of economic stagnation and inflation. The Italian central bank has cut its economic growth prognosis for 2008 and 2009 to 0.4 percent, or virtually zero growth. At the same time, July’s inflation rate (4.1 percent) was the highest in 12 years. Average incomes in Italy are already 20 percent below the average of the industrialised countries of the OECD.

Under these conditions, refugees and immigrants, who are harshly exploited as domestic servants, caregivers for the elderly or seasonal crop pickers, have been selected as scapegoats in order to divert attention away from growing social polarisation.

The government, with its Mafia-style methods, unconditionally defends the interests of the country’s super rich, first and foremost Italy’s richest man: Silvio Berlusconi. Through the passing of a custom-made immunity law the “Cavaliere” has even insured his impunity from the courts.

At the same time, the government is wracked by internal divisions: the separatist Northern League is striving for the independence of the economically stronger north at the expense of the country’s poorer southern regions. Meanwhile the National Alliance, which, as successor party to the fascist MSI, has its most powerful base of support in the south, defends the national central state.

The political crisis has also been exacerbated by the international financial crisis and high energy prices. The move to introduce police state measures is an expression of these growing social and political tensions.

The means employed by the Berlusconi government to deal with refugees and immigrants must be seen as a warning to the whole working class. By deploying troops for domestic purposes and drawing up a “gypsy file” based on a law similar to one passed by Mussolini’s dictatorship in 1941, the government is evoking the spirit of the country’s fascist past while mounting an assault on the basic social and democratic rights of the entire working class.



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