

Italy: Berlusconi decree legalises anti-immigrant vigilantes

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Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has authorised by state decree the setting up of private night-time vigilante groups. The government is thereby legalising the activities of the groups of racist and fascist thugs who have intensified their attacks on immigrants in recent weeks and months.

In the summit meeting on Friday, February 20, Berlusconi issued an emergency decree that allows volunteers in organised groups to patrol and identify suspicious individuals to report to the police. Currently, such militias are supposed to be unarmed and equipped with special mobile phones to make contact with the police. In future, the decree envisages a budget increase of €100 million from the interior ministry to fund 2,500 police reinforcements by April at the latest.

Defence Minister Ignazio La Russa, from the neo-fascist National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN), announced that the emergency decree permitting civilian vigilante groups had been unanimously agreed upon by the council of ministers. Roberto Maroni, home affairs minister and member of the racist Northern League, declared that the patrols would be organised by mayors and police chiefs, and equipped with special walkie-talkies. These measures were to avoid people "taking the law into their own hands," he maintained.

Several incidents of brutal rape have served as pretext for the official state sanctioning of civilian militias. One rape took place on New Year's Eve in Rome. Another occurred the third week of January in Guidonia, a suburb of Rome, in which a gang of Romanians reportedly raped a young woman. These incidents were graphically publicised in the media, and they have served as the propaganda cover and justification for the marauding fascist hit squads that have been roaming the streets attacking immigrants. The official authorisation of vigilantes by Berlusconi and his government only provides these groups with encouragement and support.

These gangs of thugs have targeted Romanians and Africans, as well as students and young demonstrators. One such incident took place during student protests last autumn. On October 29, the day the education reform bill was passed, a group of fascist thugs turned up in the Piazza Navona in Rome, where university and school students were protesting. The right-wing hooligans were carrying baseball bats wrapped in Italian flags, which they used to beat up the young people.

In recent weeks, countless similar attacks have taken place. On

February 16, four Romanians were attacked by a 20-strong group of thugs. Two of the Romanians were beaten so badly they had to be hospitalised. In Guidonia, a Romanian shop was demolished. Similar attacks took place the same weekend in Bologna and Milan.

In Nettuno, a town near Rome, a 35-year-old Indian man was attacked by three drunken Italians who set him alight. He was taken into intensive care with third-degree burns.

Government authorities are systematically stirring up the situation with their constant vilification of Muslims and "foreigners". For example, when hundreds of Muslims held a prayer protest in front of the cathedral in Milan and the Coliseum in Rome during the war on Gaza, politicians and the media presented their actions as an "Islamic threat" and an attack on "Western values".

When it was established that a rape had been carried out by the son of a member of the Camorra organisation from Naples, the news was kept from the public. Instead, the Home Affairs Ministry intensified its campaign for mass deportations. Home Affairs Minister Maroni announced that 500,000 immigrants would be deported this year alone.

The fascist tradition

The state sanctioning of civilian militias constitutes a new stage in the rightward development of the Berlusconi regime. The extreme-right parties, like the neo-fascist National Alliance and the separatist and openly racist Northern League, are setting the tone in the cabinet meetings. Berlusconi had already made xenophobia the central theme of his election campaign early last year. The multi-millionaire media tycoon depicted immigrants, in particular Sinti and Roma, as the main cause of the economic and social problems in Italy.

Shortly after the election victory of the Berlusconi alliance, the police and the paramilitary Carabinieri started carrying out police raids and round-ups of immigrants. At the beginning of May police units attacked foreign workers and their families and organised targeted arrests. Hundreds of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Albania, Greece, North Africa and China were taken into custody and charged with a multitude of offences, including illegal entry

into Italy. Hundreds were driven to the border and deported in a flurry of publicity.

Before the eyes of the public, the police and security stormed into a Roma encampment under the Milvio bridge on the shores of the Tiber in the capital city. Since then, Roma settlements are being systematically terrorised.

In mid-July, Berlusconi declared a so-called "asylum-seeker crisis" and announced plans to double the numbers to be detained in internment camps. For this purpose, disused army barracks throughout the country have been converted into "Identification and Extradition Centres". These prisons are being used to implement the new security legislation that allows people to be detained for up to 18 months and defines "illegal immigration" as a crime.

At the start of September, leading members of the Berlusconi government came out openly demonstrating their allegiance to fascism. Choosing, of all dates, the anniversary of the September 1943 resistance struggle, Defence Minister La Russa commemorated those fascists who stuck to Mussolini's side even after the official capitulation of Rome.

Ignazio Benito Maria La Russa, whose second forename was given him by his parents to honour the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, is the president of the National Alliance, sister party of Berlusconi's Forza Italia in the People of Freedom (Il Popolo della Libertà, PdL) alliance. Since May, as defence minister, he had led the initiatives to transform derelict army barracks into internment camps. Like his father, he was active in the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), out of which the National Alliance developed.

Other members of AN who have assumed leading posts in the government include AN President Gianfranco Fini, who is currently president of the Chamber of Deputies. The new mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, also has a fascist background.

The decree legitimising vigilante groups inevitably calls to mind the creation of the fascist legions of struggle (Fasci di Combattimento) at the end of the First World War. At the end of the war, workers and peasants had undertaken a number of occupations of land and factories. In reaction, factory owners and large landowners formed and financed armed gangs to terrorise the workers. In 1919, Benito Mussolini united the various right-wing groups to create the Blackshirts, which formed the paramilitary backbone of his fascist movement.

Economic crisis and growing poverty

The measures taken today by the government are intimately bound up with the current financial and economic crisis, which has already led to a series of mass protests in Italy. On February 13, over a million people took part in strikes and demonstrations against the Berlusconi government and demanded a social network to shield citizens against the effects of the crisis.

In particular, teachers, state officials and engineering workers took part in strike action. In Rome alone, 700,000 took to the

streets. In the autumn and winter of last year tens of thousands of young people and students took part in protests against the appalling conditions prevailing in Italian schools and universities.

Italy has the highest level of debt in Europe. Official state debt is 106 percent of the country's annual GDP. In the wake of the latest financial crisis Italy is now confronted with the threat of state bankruptcy.

At the same time, poverty levels are increasing rapidly. According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics, the number of families whose earned income is insufficient to cover monthly costs has risen from 14.6 to 15.4 percent. In particular, large families, pensioners and single-parent families are vulnerable to poverty. The situation is especially bad in southern Italy. In Sicily nearly 30 percent of all families live in poverty.

Public resentment and anger has no outlet under conditions where the political opposition in Italy has collapsed. Support for the Communist Refoundation party (Partito della Rifondazione Comunista, PRC) evaporated in the last federal election, leaving the newly founded Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) as the only parliamentary opposition. Now, however, the PD is experiencing its worst crisis since its foundation just one-and-a-half years ago.

Following a bitter election defeat for the party in Sardinia, the head of the PD, Walter Veltroni, former member of the Italian Communist Party and mayor of Rome, resigned from all his party posts. His place has been taken by the nondescript Dario Franceschini, a former Christian Democratic member of the Daisy party grouping.

In the federal election a year ago, Veltroni refrained from conducting any sort of effective campaign against Berlusconi. Following Berlusconi's re-election, Veltroni made only the mildest of criticisms of the government. When Berlusconi passed legislation allowing the army to patrol Italian cities Veltroni's only response was to criticise the government for a measure that "wastes resources while lacking effectiveness". Veltroni rejected the government's latest proposals for vigilante squads and argued instead for more resources to be made available to the regular police—a measure the Berlusconi government has agreed to and intends to put into effect.



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