“Left Alliance” defeated in Italian regional elections

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Elections took place on Sunday and Monday in 13 of Italy’s 20 regions. The election resulted in unexpected gains for the centre-right alliance led by the Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, which won power in 4 regions and now governs in a total of 6. In particular, the right-wing, racist Northern League that participates in Berlusconi’s ruling coalition significantly increased its share of the vote.

Although there is widespread popular opposition to the politics of Berlusconi, the opposition, led by the Democratic Party (DP), was unable to profit in any way. The DP lost important regions to the right wing—including Lazio, which includes the capital city of Rome, and the working-class stronghold of Piedmont, centred on the industrial hub of Turin. The DP and its alliance only retained power in 7 regions. In 2005, the party governed in a total of 11 regions.

While voters punished the DP, opposition to Berlusconi was expressed in what for Italian conditions was a very low level of voter turnout: a historic low of 64 percent. At the last comparable elections, voter turnout was 72 percent. In some regions, such as the “red bastions” of Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna and Marche, voter turnout fell by up to 10 percent compared to five years previously.

The election result demonstrated the political bankruptcy of the DP, and the organisations in its orbit that collectively describe themselves as the “centre-left.” Such organisations include *Rifondazione Comunista* (PRC), the Radical Party led by Emma Bonino, a former trade minister under Romano Prodi, and the party, Italy of Values, headed by Antonio Di Pietro, who came to prominence for his campaign against corruption (Tangentopoli). Di Pietro was also a minister in the second cabinet formed by Prodi.

The centre-left alliance registered a decline in support despite the dramatic worsening of the economic crisis in Italy, rapidly rising unemployment, growing social polarisation and broad opposition to Berlusconi and his government. One does not have to look far to see why this was the case. None of the parties involved in the left alliance were prepared to raise the social problems and concerns confronting the vast majority of the population and take up a serious struggle against the policies of Berlusconi.

In particular, they were opposed to any mobilisation of the working class because such a movement would have been directed against the policies of the centre-left. Their criticisms of Berlusconi were entirely from a tactical standpoint. They also defend the interests of the banks and the ruling elite. They regard the blatant corruption and obscene scandals that characterise Berlusconi’s regime as an obstacle to imposing the type of drastic austerity measures currently being carried out in Greece. They would like to be rid of Berlusconi but are vehemently opposed to mobilising the masses to do so.

The political cowardice of the centre-left alliance was expressed in the election by its support for completely undemocratic manoeuvres. The left camp was jubilant when it emerged that Berlusconi’s party, the People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PDL), had submitted its election lists too late and had been disqualified from the election. They reacted in a similar fashion when the PDL was excluded from the ballot paper in Lombardy because it had gathered too few signatures—i.e., when it emerged that a number of the signatures delivered were palpably false.

The opposition hoped it would be possible to stop Berlusconi in his tracks with such manoeuvres. Their hopes, however, were completely misguided. Instead, Berlusconi was able to pose as the victim of undemocratic manoeuvres and as the defender of the right to vote. He appealed against court judgements on two occasions, and on both counts an administrative court ruled that his party had failed to fulfil the necessary criteria. Berlusconi then

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pushed through a decree in the Senate, where his party has a majority, that retrospectively established a new date for the submission of electoral lists. This decree was signed by Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, but the PDL list remained excluded from the list for the city of Rome until shortly before the vote.

Berlusconi used this incident in his usual demagogic manner to complain about the delay in registering his party, which he claimed had suffered serious discrimination: “It is an issue of freedom and democracy. Should the left win because of the exclusion of our electoral list, this would represent an extremely serious precedent for the country.”

The attempt to exclude Berlusconi’s party from the election with such bureaucratic manoeuvres was sufficient to mobilise PDL supporters and enable the right wing to win Lazio and the capital city of Rome, although a range of opposition parties, including *Rifondazione Comunista*, supported the candidacy of Emma Bonino from the Radical Party.

Another means used by the left camp to suppress any independent mobilisation of the masses was the “il popolo viola” (the violet people) movement. At a series of meetings and rallies, trade union leaders, artists, journalists and former ministers under Prodi declared that the struggle against Berlusconi was not a political, but rather a moral issue. The central slogan of the movement was the demand for a “return to political ethics.”

At a March 13 protest rally in Rome against Berlusconi’s “Decree to rescue the lists,” the leader of the DP, Pier Luigi Bersani, called for the collaboration of all those who respect democracy. “Let us work together in particular to ensure that a change of consciousness is reflected at the ballot box on the part of citizens, whether from the right or the left,” Bersani explained in the manner of a political philistine.

Rifondazione Comunista played an especially despicable role in the election. As it did during its collaboration with the Prodi government, the PRC provided the pro-capitalist DP with a left cover and formed its own “left-alliance” to this end. In addition to the PRC, this alliance included the Italian Communists (Pdci) and two other small groups. The only demand raised by the alliance was “Anti-Berlusconismo,” and it supported the candidates of the DP in eight separate regions. In Lazio, it supported the election campaign of Emma Bonino and the Radical Party.

These elections revealed the extent of the political bankruptcy of the PRC. In Campania, where the party stood its leader and the former minister for social affairs in the Prodi government, Paolo Ferrero, the PRC picked up just 1.56 percent of the vote. The left alliance received just 2.0 percent in Lombardy, 2.8 percent in Emilia Romagna, 1.5 percent in Venice, 3.8 percent in Marche, and 2.7 percent in Lazio.

The degree to which the PRC is discredited was also revealed in Emilia Romagna, where the satirist Beppe Grillo was able to pick up 6.0 percent of the vote, compared to 2.8 percent for Refounded Communism. This despite the fact that Beppe Grillo lacked any positive political perspective and centred his own campaign on just one demand—that nobody convicted or accused of an offence should be able to enter parliament.

Nichi Vendola, who heads a former wing of the PRC that broke from the organisation one and half years ago, was able to defend his post as regional president in Apulia. Vendola was able to win 48.7 percent of the vote based on the backing of the DP, the left alliance and the Radical Party. In virtually all other regions, Vendola’s list “Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà” (Left Ecology and Freedom) put up candidates as part of the centre-left alliance.

Due to the political bankruptcy of the left camp, Berlusconi emerged strengthened from the election—much to his own surprise. Just a few weeks ago, a series of opinion polls had predicted heavy losses for his party. On Tuesday, he was able to go before the press and speak of a “historic victory.”

In fact, his Party of Freedom won an average of just 27 percent—10 percent less than the showing of the party in the parliamentary elections of 2008. In the same year, the centre-right alliance won 47 percent. It was in particular the racist Northern League that was able to increase its share of the vote to an average 13 percent. The result for the Northern League showed how far-right outfits profit from the refusal of the so-called left camp to oppose the capitalist policies of the government.

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