

Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi narrowly survives confidence vote

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Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi remains in office temporarily. On Tuesday, he survived a tense no confidence vote by a narrow majority.

In the House of Deputies, 314 voted for and 311 against Berlusconi. In the Senate, the result was as had been expected: 162 Senators supporting the prime minister and 135 against.

In May 2008, Berlusconi was elected prime minister for the fourth time since 1994. His coalition government, consisting of his party, People of Freedom (PDL), and the xenophobic Northern League, had a secure majority in both houses of parliament.

However, the impact of the international economic crisis is rapidly undermining the Berlusconi government. After Greece, Italy's state debt is the second highest in the European Union. Youth unemployment is 25 percent, and 8 million of 60 million Italians live on less than €800 a month.

Faced with this crisis, the government was largely paralyzed and stumbled from one scandal to the next. Allegations of bribery and mafia involvement in Berlusconi's media empire, which had kept his previous government in limbo, were followed by sex scandals with minors involving the 74-year-old Berlusconi, which dominated the headlines for weeks. The piles of rubbish in Naples, which in the election Berlusconi had promised to eliminate, are piling up even higher today.

In the ranks of his own followers Berlusconi has increasingly been losing support. Leading business representatives have turned their backs on him. The chair of the industrialists' association, Emma Marcegaglia, attacked him publicly. Her predecessor, Ferrari CEO Luca di Montezemolo, said, "After 15 years of failure to act, it is time to put an end to this one-man show."

In the end, parliamentary speaker Gianfranco Fini headed up the opposition. In 2009, this former fascist had merged his Alleanza Nazionale (AN) with Berlusconi's party. Now he saw his chances fade of becoming Berlusconi's successor, and he decided to rebel. In the summer of 2010, he and 36 of his MPs broke away from the ruling party, founding his own group called "Future and Freedom for Italy" (FLI), thus depriving Berlusconi of his majority in the House of Representatives.

After some hesitation, Fini's FLI also tabled a censure motion. What followed was a dirty fight that is unparalleled in Italy. The Berlusconi camp supposedly bribed two MPs with €500,000, promised another an order for his company and a fourth a seat in the future government. Others were threatened with the prospect of losing their seats, with the promise held out of a safe position on a future slate.

One day before the confidence vote, Berlusconi threatened that his dismissal would plunge the country into the heart of the European debt crisis. Given the persistent speculation in financial markets, it would be "political madness, with no obvious and credible reasons for bringing about a crisis", he said. At the same time, he offered the opposition Christian Democrats (UDC) positions in a future government.

Several of Fini's followers appeared receptive to Berlusconi's enticements and threats. Six of the 36 FLI deputies said it was unreasonable to risk such a government crisis and that they would vote for Berlusconi "out of deep concern for the country". Nevertheless, the confidence vote was extremely close, and the session was interrupted when fighting broke out between deputies.

The passing of the confidence vote will not resolve the political crisis in Italy. Given its limited and

precarious majority, the government is barely able to act. Before the vote, Berlusconi's coalition partner Umberto Bossi of the Northern League had been pushing for early elections. "You cannot rule with a majority of one, the only solution is fresh elections," he said.

The decline of Italy's democratic institutions in a whirl of corruption, bribery and sex affairs has reached a level that triggers only horror and disgust among many voters.

Intellectuals and cultural figures have repeatedly taken to the streets to express their outrage with Berlusconi. Last Saturday, tens of thousands answered the call by the Democratic Party (PD) and demonstrated in Rome against the politics of the head of government. "This demonstration will be the beginning of a historic change, which will put an end to Berlusconi", PD chief Pierluigi Bersani announced. Those at the demonstration are "the Italy of tomorrow," he declared.

In desperation over the fact that Berlusconi seemingly survives every affair and numerous setbacks, repeatedly returning to power over the last 16 years, many intellectuals blame the mass of the population.

Best-selling author Umberto Eco told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, "Many Italians admire Berlusconi, because he fools them that he does what every Italian man would like to do—play around with women and pay no taxes. Berlusconi represents their wildest dreams." As a solution, Eco proposes a "moral renewal" of Italian society.

In reality, responsibility for Berlusconi's persistence in power lies with the so-called opposition, led by the Democrats, who emerged from the Communist Party in 1991. Whenever they have been involved in government—from 1996 to 2001 and again from 2006 to 2008—they have imposed massive cuts in social programs and attacks on working people, opening Berlusconi's way back to power.

The "opposition" parties are supported and defended by a plethora of middle-class groups, gathered into the *Rifondazione Comunista* party. Rifondazione argues that the Democrats are the lesser evil, and in 2006 even joined the government of bourgeois politician Romano Prodi—thereby breaking their own political neck. In two years, the Prodi government had so thoroughly disappointed its voters that Berlusconi was able to return to power in triumph.

The Democrats do not attack Berlusconi for his policies carried out in the interests of the rich and powerful. Rather, they are concerned that the government is not forcing through austerity measures with the same vigour as the PD's social democratic friends in Greece, Spain and Portugal. The so-called "left" has moved so far away from the mass of the population that they fear new elections and would prefer the formation of a "government of technocrats."

While the xenophobic Northern League pushes for new elections, and Berlusconi hopes for re-election, the Democrats are hiding behind the fascist Fini, leaving the political initiative to him. "We are forced to follow the will of the former neo-fascists, a somewhat strange experience," commented Enrico Letta, a prominent Democrat and close associate of former Prime Minister Prodi on Saturday at the demonstration in Rome.

In Italy, the central problem facing working people throughout Europe and the world can be seen most clearly: among the established parties, there is not a single one that articulates and represents the interests of the working class. The reformist parties and programmes, which promise social improvements while leaving the capitalist system intact, are all bankrupt. Only an international offensive by the working class on the basis of a socialist program can stop the political and social reaction, so vividly represented in the person of Berlusconi.



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