

Bloody clashes with police and anti-Berlusconi demonstrators in Rome

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Riot police clashed violently with demonstrators who gathered in Rome on Tuesday to protest against the right-wing government of Silvio Berlusconi. An estimated crowd of 50,000 assembled in the middle of the capital evidently hoping to celebrate a vote against Berlusconi in Italy's lower house of parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, which would have brought down his government.

A large proportion of those taking part were students and university personnel protesting against the government's recently-approved university reform bill. Others taking part in the demonstrations included sections of workers, unemployed and immigrants, as well as victims of last year's earthquake in the Abruzzo region, still waiting to be rehoused.

Streets around the parliament were closed off by armoured police vans throwing up a so-called "ring of steel". In the event, Berlusconi won the vote of confidence in the lower house on Tuesday by three votes. Upon hearing the result, angry demonstrators tried to march on parliament hurling paint, eggs and firecrackers. A number of masked protesters also threw stones, breaking shop windows.

Italian police and paramilitary units responded by firing rounds of tear gas and conducting baton charges at the mainly youthful demonstrators. Faced with a large wave of protesters, police units withdrew and drew in a group of demonstrators who were then encircled and clubbed. Video of the protests show a number of demonstrators with bloody faces following confrontations with the police that lasted into Tuesday evening.

At least 100 people were injured during the protests and more than 40 protesters were arrested by police. The fierce clashes with police have widely been described as the most violent in Italy for the past 30 years.

One photo of the protests shows a policeman surrounded by demonstrators clutching his pistol with his finger on the trigger. The image brings to mind the shooting of student Carlo Giuliani by a police officer at the demonstrations provoked by the Group of Eight summit in Genoa in 2001.

In this case, no shot was fired, but police authorities immediately sought to justify the action of the officer. According to one report he had no intention of firing the gun, but was merely "courageously seeking to prevent it being taken by the rioters". Another report declared that the policeman had accidentally dropped his weapon and was seeking to retrieve it when the photo was taken.

Students involved in the protests expressed their anger and frustration, not only with the government, but all the parties represented in parliament. "While they are doing their little game in parliament, we are heading towards catastrophe. Where is my future? I don't feel represented by this government, I don't feel represented in my own country", Marco, a 19-year-old university student, told the media.

Another university student Valerio was just as dismissive of the entire political elite: "They haven't done anything. For universities nothing has been done and we are in a situation which is getting worse every day".

Maroni.

The protests were not limited to Rome. Students also blocked Palermo airport in Sicily and occupied the stock market building in Milan. Protesters in the latter incident were physically expelled from the building after a short period of time by a large contingent of police.

Further demonstrations and protests took place on Wednesday to accompany the second no confidence vote held in the Italian Senate, which Berlusconi won by a larger margin, 162 to 135. After the vote, protesters once again clashed with large numbers of riot police throughout the centre of Rome. Many of the demonstrators wore 'For Sale' signs in protest at claims that Berlusconi had bought the votes of parliamentary deputies.

When the right-wing mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, visited the central Piazza del Popolo to inspect the damage of the day before he was booed by demonstrators. On the same day, leading politicians from across the political spectrum condemned the demonstrations. According to Berlusconi, the protests were nothing more than "organised vandalism".

Italian interior minister Roberto Maroni, from the racist and separatist Northern League, went farther and defended police tactics, while declaring that he would show no tolerance to this type of "new terrorism". Adding his voice to the choir of those slandering the demonstrators was the leader of the biggest opposition party, Pierluigi Bersani of the Democratic Party (PD), who denounced the protests saying: "There is no justification for this type of vandalism".

The confidence votes in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate resulted from a falling out between Prime Minister Berlusconi and his long-time ally, veteran neo-fascist Gianfranco Fini. While the two men have tangled on tactical issues, they both support the type of aggressive police-state actions carried out on Tuesday. Both Berlusconi and Fini argued for an amnesty for the police involved in the shooting of Giuliani in 2001. The interior minister at the time responsible for the riot police, as well as the operations of police provocateurs within the so-called "black bloc," was none other than

The demonstrations in Rome this week represent the angriest displays of opposition to the Berlusconi government and the entire political establishment in Italy for decades. In their composition they most clearly resemble the student protests which have taken place in recent weeks in Britain. Another common feature of the demonstrations is the aggressive response by the two respective governments, which seek to criminalise popular protest.



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