

Italian politicians fear spread of “Egyptian fever”

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The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt are causing anxiety among Italian government and opposition politicians who fear “Egyptian fever” could spread to their side of the Mediterranean.

Traditionally, Italy’s economic and geo-strategic relations with the Maghreb and North Africa have been close, especially to Libya, a former Italian colony, which supplies gas and oil and controls the flow of refugees from Africa. But Italy also has close relations with Egypt and Tunisia. Italy is Egypt’s most important export partner, and its ports are an important trans-shipment route for Egyptian crude oil and petroleum products, cotton, textiles, metal products and chemicals for all of Europe.

For days, leading politicians in Italy have concentrated on playing down the events in Egypt, trying to shield the working class from them, as much as possible.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his ministers have done this particularly clumsily. At the recent EU meeting in Brussels, Berlusconi praised the “wisdom” of Hosni Mubarak, whom he regards as a crucial guarantor of stability in North Africa. “In the Middle East, all have seen in Mubarak a particularly significant and wise man,” he said.

When asked by journalists whether Mubarak should resign, Berlusconi said he had no answer but added, “There is big difference between what a nation of eighty million Egyptians thinks and what one or two million who take to the streets think.”

His foreign minister, Franco Frattini, said he would like to wish the Egyptian people an “orderly transition” to more democracy; however, what was more important was to “counter violence and the descent into radical Islam”. The army must ensure that peace returns, he said. “Stability in Egypt is also crucial for the economy and trade in the Mediterranean, and therefore to all Europe.” If Mubarak resigned tomorrow, chaos would erupt, Frattini declared.

Interior Minister Roberto Maroni of Lega Nord (Northern League), returning from a European ministers meeting in Krakow, Poland, declared that the uprisings in the Maghreb could fuel the threat of terrorism in Europe. Members of al-Qaida could hide themselves in a new flow of refugees to Europe. “We discussed the hot situation in the North African

countries and what risks it entails for Europe,” said Maroni. “We are very concerned about what is happening in the countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.” While the foreign ministers developed diplomatic initiatives, the interior ministers had “turned on the alarm system”. Vigilance was “exceptionally high”.

The opposition centre-left politicians are no less concerned about a possible spread of the uprisings. They are seeking to ensure that stability is restored as soon as possible in Egypt.

Their leader, the head of the Democratic Party (PD), Pier-Luigi Bersani, places special importance on the initiatives taken by the EU, meant to encourage a peaceful transfer of power. Italy should play an important role in this regard, Bersani said, adding, “We are the country, which for geographic, historical and cultural reasons is called upon to play a role for the EU in this region. We are the first or second business partner of all these countries.”

The same line is taken by Nichi Vendola, former leader of Rifondazione Comunista and governor of Puglia. While the European governments disguise their close collaboration with the US, the Mubarak regime and Egypt’s army leaders behind phrases about a “peaceful transition to democracy”, Vendola’s spokesman Gennaro Migliore stokes up illusions in the EU, declaring: “We demand that Italy and the countries of the European Union condemn repression in Egypt, and work concretely for democratic renewal in the sense of the legitimate aspirations of the people.”

Meanwhile, the foreign affairs spokesperson for Rifondazione Comunista, Fabio Amato, warned his political colleagues, “Without a deep and radical questioning of the free market economy, the rebellions on the Mediterranean will be only the first in a long line. It cannot be excluded that they will spill across the Mediterranean and reach our shores.”

The greatest dread that haunts politicians, more than any fear of terrorism, is that the working class in Italy itself could take up the struggle. This would include not just the million North Africans in Italy, among the most marginalised and exploited workers, but the entire working class.

Italy is one of the countries where income inequality has grown the most in the last 10 years, as a 2008 OECD study demonstrates. About 20 percent of households now live below

the poverty line of €500 a month. One in four young people are unemployed—in southern Italy, as many as one third.

The politicians, the banks and representatives of the bourgeoisie are nakedly calling for more neo-liberal “reforms” to decimate what is left of social protections. The cost of the 2008 financial crisis and the massive state deficit it has produced are being heaped upon the working class.

The government is feverishly working to enforce new laws for the benefit of big business. To this end, Berlusconi wants to modify Article 41 of the Italian constitution. This article, which stems from the immediate post-war situation, states that the economy should only be developed in accordance with the security, freedom and human dignity of Italy’s citizens.

Berlusconi is proposing to revise this article entirely in the interests of the free market economy. As he says, he wants a “true liberal revolution,” that will “liberate Italy from state-ist mentality” and create “economic zones with zero bureaucracy”.

The new contracts signed at the Fiat factories in Turin and Naples are in this vein. They mean a huge increase in exploitation, a ban on strikes, and the abolition of the previous industry-wide labour contracts. The new contracts have been welcomed by the government and the employers’ association as a historic change in class relations.

Another major thrust of the government is the new “federalism” law, which will give the regions greater financial autonomy. The law represents another sharp attack on social rights, particularly of workers in southern Italy. The Northern League of Umberto Bossi is demanding this be pushed through; otherwise it will force new elections. For a long time, it has been the goal of Lega Nord to seek the separation of the richer north of Italy from the poor southern regions. They are seeking to achieve this in what would be the 150th anniversary of Italian unification in 1861.

Since the break with Gianfranco Fini and his supporters, Berlusconi has not had a stable majority in parliament. As a result, the new federalism law was rejected Thursday by a parliamentary committee. The government passed it into law anyway using an emergency decree. On Saturday, head of state Giorgio Napolitano refused to sign the new law and referred it back to parliament.

Last week, in a letter to the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Berlusconi offered to collaborate with the opposition in face of the “monstrous national deficit”. He recalled, “the PD secretary had been receptive to the theme of liberalisation”, and wrote: “I propose to Bersani that we collaborate in parliament, and without prejudice and exclusivity discuss a grand, non-partisan plan for the growth of the Italian economy.”

Bersani turned down the offer. Instead, the Democrats are collecting 10 million signatures against Berlusconi. Bersani is intent on establishing a “grand coalition” with a “Third Pole”, which includes the Christian Democrat Pier Ferdinando Casini, the ex-Democrat Francesco Rutelli and the ex-fascist Gianfranco Fini. This formation, which has just renamed itself

“Nuovo Polo per l’Italia” (New Pole for Italy), is the political vehicle through which Fini wants to replace Berlusconi.

Politically, such a “right-left coalition” including the Democrats would hardly differ from the previous government. Yet it would be less burdened with sex and corruption scandals than the Berlusconi government, and thus more able to impose the attacks on the population being demanded by big business.

There is not a single party that represents the interests of the working class. This political vacuum is explosive, especially since there has been no let-up to the protests against social attacks and the government.

Ten days ago, union officials called a token eight-hour strike by Fiat workers across the country. However, workers shouted down representatives of the CGIL and FIOM trade unions and demanded the calling of a general strike. Last weekend, tens of thousands demonstrated against Berlusconi in Milan and Florence. Protesters compared him to Mubarak and called for his “immediate resignation”. Prominent writers such as Umberto Eco and Roberto Saviano also participated in the protests.

With journalist Marco Travaglio and the political comedian Beppe Grillo, oppositional TV host Michele Santoro wants to establish a new political grouping at the end of the month and participate in any new elections. “The current centre-left camp,” it says in its statement, “is raising the white flag in this important struggle, it is not in a position to represent us.”

Such initiatives do not go beyond the struggle against “Berlusconi-ism” and offer no perspective for the working class. However, they demonstrate the utter bankruptcy of the so-called opposition, especially the Democratic Party, which emerged 20 years ago out of the Stalinist Italian Communist Party. Since then, the Democrats have twice been in government, supported by Rifondazione Comunista, and each time their massive attacks on working people only ended in returning Berlusconi to power.

It is time that the working class made a conscious break with the nationalist and bourgeois politics of the Stalinists, trade unionists, social democrats and Pabloites, and reorganise itself independently on the basis of an international and socialist perspective. The revolutionary developments that have begun in the North African uprisings are also creating entirely new conditions in Italy.



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