

Berlusconi suffers defeat in Italian elections

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The Italian government coalition under Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi suffered a crushing defeat in local elections. Berlusconi's party lost the mayor's office in the financial metropolis of Milan, which is also Berlusconi's home town.

Giuliano Pisapia, who was supported by the "centre-left" parties, won 55 percent of the vote in Milan, ten points in front of Letizia Moratti, the former mayor and a member of Berlusconi's People of Freedom Party (PDL).

The significance of Pisapia's victory goes beyond Milan. After the first ballot, several newspapers wrote that it could signal the beginning of the end of the Berlusconi era. "The wind from the north has turned. The result has national significance", wrote Zurich's *Tages-Anzeiger*.

Other cities such as Bologna, Turin and Cagliari also turned away from the government coalition towards the opposition. In Turin, Piero Fassino, a leading politician of the Democratic Party (PD), replaced the former PDL mayor in the first round. The PD also won in Arcore, north of Milan, where Berlusconi has his residence.

In Naples, the prosecutor Luigi de Magistris of the Italy of Values Party (IDV) won in a run-off against the PDL candidate. The IDV was founded by corruption investigator Antonio di Pietro. This too was a clear defeat for Berlusconi, who regularly dubs the Italian justice system as a "cancer".

Berlusconi had declared the election in Milan to be a referendum on his policies. But while his party received 53,000 votes in Milan in the parliamentary elections five years ago, this time the vote fell by half, to 28,000.

Shortly before the second round of voting in Milan, Berlusconi launched a racist appeal to his "fellow Milanese" saying they should not abandon the city to the "far left", because otherwise Milan would fall to the Islamists and become a "Gypsy city of Roma camps". With Pisapia as mayor, red flags with the hammer and sickle will soon be waving over Milan, he said, and the city is being dubbed "Italy's Stalingrad".

The separatist Lega Nord (Northern League), Berlusconi's previous coalition partners, only managed

9.6 percent in the capital of Lombardy, five percentage points less than in the municipal elections five years ago. The city of Novara, formerly a stronghold of the Northern League, went to the Democratic Party. The Northern League candidate in Varese could not win outright in the first round and it had to go to a second round. In Turin, their support dropped from ten percent to less than seven percent.

Umberto Bossi, head of the Northern League, is trying to distance himself from his former coalition partners. In Milan, the Northern League hardly lifted a finger to help Berlusconi's candidate in the second round. In several north Italian municipalities the party did not stand a joint slate with the PDL.

On closer inspection, the Milan election result does not demonstrate support for the politics of the Democratic Party, but rather opposition to the ruling parties. The party chair, Pierluigi Bersani, had initially shown his preference for a different candidate, Stefano Boeri. However, Pisapia won surprisingly in the primaries, and was supported especially by Nichi Vendola's Left, Ecology and Freedom Party (SEL). The voters regarded him primarily not as a representative of the official opposition, but as a "new face".

As a lawyer, Pisapia has acted for the defence in several prominent cases, which gave him a left image in Milan. He had taken on the defence of the leader of the Kurdish PKK Abdullah Öcalan when he was arrested in Italy. Later, Pisapia represented the family of Carlo Giuliani in court, the young man killed at the Genoa G8 summit in 2001.

Pisapia is by no means a political outsider, however, and has longstanding ties with the Italian political establishment. Since 1996, he has held a seat in parliament as an independent several times, sometimes standing on the list of Rifondazione Comunista. From 2006-2008, he worked as legal counsel in the Justice Commission under Romano Prodi's government. In particular, he supported Prodi's pension "reforms".

He has collaborated with Prodi over many years. When

Prodi was president of IRI, the state holding company, he began to privatize various state-owned operations in 1985, selling off the state food company SME to the entrepreneur De Benedetti, Berlusconi's adversary. Berlusconi later dragged the deal into the courts, where Pisapia helped Prodi in his capacity as a lawyer for De Benedetti.

Before the election, Prodi had expressly supported Pisapia, saying: "He is a person whom I respect and honour, and with whom I feel friendship and gratitude. During my time in government, I especially remember his ability to mediate between delicate and difficult political positions."

Berlusconi's defeat in Milan expresses a contradictory development. First, the election result expresses the immense popular hostility in Italy to the policies of the government and the consequences of the economic crisis.

According to the Italian statistics office Istat, one in four Italians is defined as poor. A new study on youth unemployment shows that only one in two 18-29 year-olds in the north has a steady job, while in the south less than one in three young people have work. As far as retirees are concerned, the state pension is below €500 a month, and eighty percent of pensioners receive less than a thousand euros a month. These are shocking figures which reveal rampant poverty in Italy.

For many workers, the situation is becoming increasingly unbearable. The new contract at auto company Fiat, which represents a considerable worsening of wages, working conditions and workers' rights, now serves as a model for many Italian employers. A strike is ongoing at the coffee company Lavazza in Turin, which has also pledged to introduce a new contract and reduce its workforce.

A week ago in Genoa, there was open confrontation between workers at the Fincantieri shipyard and the police. Fincantieri, Italy's largest state-run shipyard, wanted to sack 2,550 workers and close three plants. When a section of the workforce went to demonstrate outside the Genoa prefecture, it resulted in street battles with several injured. Since then workers at the shipyard in Sestri Ponente near Genoa have also gone on strike.

At the same time, the defeat of the ruling party, and the manner in which this has been interpreted by the newspapers, also expresses a different development. Influential financial and economic circles are increasingly supporting a political change in order to be rid of the discredited Berlusconi government.

The concern of sections of the ruling class is that the

Berlusconi government has not been active enough in cutting government spending, and that it has not been energetic enough in "reforming" the labour market. Instead, the government has been consumed mainly with Berlusconi's legal problems.

For example, Emma Marcegaglia, head of the employers' association Confindustria, recently demanded "drastic structural reforms" and expressed her bitterness about "the lost decade that we carry along on our shoulders, which has brought us low competitiveness and little growth". She complained about that "breaches and problems of personal leadership" that was "in conflict with the good of politics"—a clear dig at Berlusconi and his numerous scandals. The head of government is again in court because of two sex and corruption charges.

The global financial markets are also applying pressure. Last week, the rating agency Standard & Poor's downgraded Italy's credit-worthiness from "stable" to "negative". The agency is forecasting "weak growth" for the Italian economy, "low commitment to reforms" and "high debt". The poor rating could lead to higher interest rates on Italian government bonds.

Almost simultaneously, the National Audit Office warned of the high national debt, which is approaching 120 percent of gross domestic product. Subsequently, Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti announced that the previously agreed austerity measures of more than 24 billion euros was not enough, and that Italy would in fact need to cut 46 billion euros—almost double.

Regardless of the sentiment of the population, which is opposed to austerity measures, the task of any government that might replace Berlusconi would be to escalate the attack on the working class. As is happening in Greece and Spain, where Social Democratic governments are pushing through deep cuts, the so-called "left" parties in Italy would demonstrate their complete support for the financial elite.



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