

Italian local elections: high abstention and a protest against austerity

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The local elections held last weekend in Italy were characterised by high levels of abstention. Compared to last year's local elections average voter turnout declined by seven percent, from about 74 to 67 percent. In addition, those parties that support the austerity policies of the Monti government lost a large percentage of their vote. Increased votes were registered for smaller fringe parties and the protest list headed by the comedian Beppe Grillo.

In the first round on May 6-7, local elections were held in Genoa, Palermo, Parma, Verona, Bologna and hundreds of smaller communities. Some provincial elections also took place. A total of nine million voters, one in five of the Italian electorate, went to the ballot box. It was the first election since the assumption of power by technocrat Mario Monti and therefore an important test.

The traditional parties and politicians lost heavily. Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom party (PdL) suffered heavy defeats almost across the board. Following a recent corruption scandal and the resignation of party founder Umberto Bossi, the Northern League also registered an historic low poll. The Northern League mayor, Flavio Tosi, was confirmed in Verona only after clearly distancing himself from Bossi. The PdL and the Northern League have now dissolved their alliance.

In the Sicilian capital of Palermo, a traditional stronghold of the PdL, Berlusconi's party failed to even reach the second round. The victor in the city was Leoluca Orlando, the candidate of the party Italy of Values (IdV), who gained 46 percent and stands against the candidate of the Democratic Party (PD), Fabrizio Ferrandelli, in the second round. In the primaries Ferrandelli had achieved an unexpected victory against the candidate favoured by the party leadership, Rita

Borsellino.

Just a few weeks before the election, Italy of Values had put forward the former Mayor Orlando as its candidate. Orlando stems from the camp of the right wing and was mayor of Palermo on no less than four occasions in the 1980s and 1990, gaining a reputation as an opponent of the Mafia. This time around, Orlando was able to win support from the Greens and Communist Refoundation, and emerged as the strongest candidate from the first round.

In Genoa, another political outsider, economics professor Marco Doria (a descendent of Genoese nobleman Andrea Doria), was able to make the running in the PD primary while the party's official candidates lagged behind. Like the Milan mayor, Giuseppe Pisapia, who last fall notched up a victory against the party leader of the center-left camp, Marco Doria was able to win the support of some groups outside of the traditional parties. With 48 percent of the vote, he enters the second round as the favourite.

The Democratic Party (PD) was able to hold on to most of its mayoral posts but mostly on the basis of support for local politicians who are regarded as relatively independent of the official party line. The PD is the main successor to the Communist Party, and together with Berlusconi's PdL unconditionally supports the austerity policies of Mario Monti.

Candidates on the list of the comedian Beppe Grillo, the "Five Star Movement" were able to notch some notable successes. In Parma the list won nearly 20 percent of the vote in its first-ever showing, in a contest with a coalition of Democrats and Italy of Values. In Genoa, the Movement won 14 percent and in Verona nine percent of the vote. On average, Grillo's candidates averaged around eight percent.

This is despite the fact that Grillo offers no sort of

alternative to the traditional parties and politicians he criticises. He diverts widespread public outrage at the arrogance and corruption of the political elite into right-wing channels: a devoted supporter of the free market economic system, he calls for an end to waste, “clean” politics and the promotion of local and green initiatives and small businesses against the multinationals and international banks.

Grillo has recently sought to exploit public hostility to the European Union. He is now demanding that Italy should leave the euro zone. The EU is seen quite correctly by many Italian workers as an instrument of the European banks and the driving force behind the brutal austerity measures.

Grillo is clearly profiting from the vacuum on the left. The demise of the former workers' parties and trade unions, their nationalism, together with their support for the diktats of the EU and the social counterrevolution pursued by the Monti government means that a thoroughly diffuse and essentially backward-looking movement as the “Grillini” has been able to benefit from the growing anger of a broad social strata.

The elections took place against a backdrop of growing recession. Industrial production in the first quarter of 2012 sank by 2.3 percent and gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 1.6 percent. Many companies have reported mass layoffs or bankruptcy.

The drastic austerity measures introduced by the Monti government have significantly worsened the situation of working people in a short period of time. The pension cuts and the increase in the age of retirement means that thousands of seniors have to wait longer for their pensions, even though they have not the slightest chance of getting a job. Their descent into poverty is inevitable.

The suicide rate has risen dramatically as unemployed workers and small entrepreneurs decide to take their lives because of the financially hopeless situation. The artisan association CGIA reports that over a thousand people took their lives last year—25 percent more than the previous year. This year there are likely to be far more victims.

The official rate of unemployment in March was two and a half million—an increase of half a million or 23 percent compared to the previous year. This trend is increasing. Total unemployment rose in March by 2.7

percent compared with the previous month. Unemployment has risen steeply since the introduction of drastic austerity measures by the Monti government in November 2011.

If one includes so-called “inactive” workers, i.e., those of working age but who have not looked for work last month, then the official unemployment rate soars to 14.5 million people, or 36.7 percent of the population of working age.

In March 2012, 22.9 million people were registered on payrolls, which represents an employment rate of only 57 percent for people between the ages of 15 and 64 years. For women the employment rate is below 50 percent. In addition, 36 percent of all young people between 15 and 24 are officially unemployed.

These figures show that an enormous social explosion is brewing beneath the surface. The results of the recent elections are just the first indications of the political upheavals to come.



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