

Sicily elects new regional president

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The newly elected regional president of Sicily took office in the Norman Palace in Palermo on November 12. Unlike almost every Sicilian president since the Second World War, Rosario Crocetta is not a Christian Democrat and minion of the Mafia but comes from the Communist Party, was a member of the Stalinist Communist Refoundation party and is considered an active Mafia opponent. As mayor of Gela, he twice narrowly escaped assassination attempts by the Cosa Nostra.

In the early regional elections of October 28, Crocetta contested for the Democratic Party (PD) and the Union of Christian and Centre Democrats (UDC), a smaller Christian democratic party. He won election at the expense of Silvio Berlusconi's party, People of Freedom (PdL), which suffered a resounding defeat. Although the PdL had garnered 33.4 percent and filled the presidential post following the last local elections, this time it polled only 12.9 percent. Together with a split-off group that took 9 percent, it reached 22 percent.

The early regional election became necessary because Raffaele Lombardo, the incumbent regional president, had been forced to resign at the end of this past July due to his involvement with the Mafia. At the time, Sicily's budget was so far in the red that it had to be supplemented by the national government in Rome. Prime Minister Mario Monti made emergency loans for Sicily—amounting to €900 million (US\$1.15 billion)—conditional on Lombardo's resignation from the presidency and the implementation of a comprehensive austerity program.

Rosario Crocetta, the new president, can only rely on 39 of the 90 seats in parliament. He received slightly more than 30 percent of the ballot, which means that—given the voter turnout of 47 percent—less than 15 percent of the electorate voted for him. Crocetta must now govern with a minority.

Nevertheless, his entry into office is being celebrated by

the media and leading politicians of the centre-left—like Pierluigi Bersani (PD) and Nichi Vendola (Left Ecology Liberty, SEL)—as a turning point, a new beginning and a “Sicilian revolution”. They claim the “communist, Catholic and self-professed homosexual” will do away with the Mafia.

At a rally in Palermo on the evening of Sunday, November 11, Crocetta promised that cronyism and waste would now be coming to an end. As he was taking to the stage, the audience chanted the demand for “Work, work!”. He replied, “Yeah, right. But to create work, we have to put an end to privileges and squandering, and root out a ruling class that has destroyed this Sicily”.

Crocetta's alleged “fight against the Mafia and corruption” is primarily intended to divert attention from his real task of serving the Monti government by implementing the most brutal austerity package in Sicilian history.

Sicily is a particularly dramatic example of what is currently happening throughout the whole of Italy. In order to balance the budget, the government is enforcing draconian social cuts and tax increases and attacking the rights of the workers. The working class is becoming more and more impoverished, while prices—particularly for gasoline and heating—are constantly on the rise. Under Monti's rule, youth unemployment has officially increased by 5 percent from just under 30 percent late last year to 35 percent today.

Sicily was already regarded as Italy's poorhouse. Unemployment is constantly rising as a result of the euro crisis and recession. According to statistics from September, it has reached 25 percent in Sicily, while youth unemployment there is officially approaching the 50 percent mark. A year ago, the Fiat factory was closed in Termini Imerese. This showed the government had finally ditched the attempt, undertaken in the post-war

period, to develop the Mezzogiorno (Southern Italy) with the aid of public investment.

The new Sicilian government will now subject pensions, schools, hospitals and social services to rigorous cost-cutting measures. The jobs of 35,000 workers in the public sector hang in the balance. Characteristic is the Crocetta government's response to the current weeks-long strike of garbage collectors, many of whom have not been paid since May due to lack of state resources. The strike will now be terminated by sacking another 400 workers and imposing an enforced return to work on the rest of the workforce.

During the regional elections in October, two features were particularly apparent. First, the turnout of 47 percent was extremely low compared to that of 67 percent in 2008. It meant that not even every second voter in the 4.4 million-strong Sicilian electorate went to the polls. Equally striking was the rise of the Five Stars Movement (Cinquestelle), the protest party organized on the Internet by comedian Beppe Grillo. Polling 15 percent of the vote, it emerged as the strongest single party in the election. Moreover, Five Stars candidate Giancarlo Cancelleri won 18.2 percent to take second place behind Rosario Crocetta.

Beppe Grillo's support consisted of typical protest votes. He railed against the European Union and the euro, against waste and corruption, and against politicians and parties, without ever drawing attention to the capitalist interests they serve. During the election campaign, Grillo swam across the Strait of Messina in order to protest against the construction of a bridge connecting Sicily with the mainland. All in all, Grillo advocates a right-wing and populist programme that demands, among other things, stock market reform, the promotion of local products and a stronger voice for small shareholders.

The high number of abstentions and votes for Beppe Grillo constitute a clear vote of no confidence in the established parties. This mood among voters also accounts for the performance of the winning candidate, Rosario Crocetta, who railed loudly against corruption, waste and Mafia involvement, promising that he would do "everything differently".

Crocetta represents the kind of "Sicilian revolution" envisaged by the young Tancredi, scion of the royal house

in Salina in Tomasi di Lampedusa's famous novel *The Leopard*, when he says: "If we want everything to stay as it is, everything will have to change".

Crocetta's image as a staunch opponent of the "honoured society" (the Mafia) has already suffered damage in the election. The Sicilian UDC, which supported him, had for years also aided Salvatore "Totò" Cuffaro, a former president of Sicily (2001-2008) and agent of the Cosa Nostra. Cuffaro has since been sentenced to seven years in prison for doling out preferential treatment to the Mafia.

The powerful presence of the Mafia in Sicily goes back to the origins of the modern Italian state. When they landed in Sicily in July 1943, the allied forces used the services of the Mafia to maintain public order, liquidate communist resistance and counter the threat of revolution. Many Mafia mobsters were therefore able to secure public office.

For its part, the Stalinist Communist Party defended the bourgeois order in the name of "national unity" and rejected a revolutionary uprising that would have eradicated the landowners and thus the material basis for the Mafia in Sicily.

The economic crisis, unemployment and increasing social misery are today creating fertile ground for the Mafia and other reactionary organizations. Far from combatting these dark forces, Crocetta's austerity program will give them new impetus.



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