

# Italy before the elections

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The Italian elections will take place on February 24 and 25 against a backdrop of deep economic and social crisis. Initially planned for April, the elections were brought forward at short notice when the technocrat regime of Mario Monti resigned in December.

The rigid austerity measures imposed by Monti in collaboration with the European Union have plunged the country into deep recession. Last year, economic output sank by 2.3 percent, new vehicle registrations fell 20 percent, and several tens of thousands of firms went bankrupt.

The official unemployment rate reached 11 percent, its highest level in eight years. Among youth the unemployment rate is 37 percent. If people who have left the labor force are also counted, the unemployment level is even higher; instead of the three million who are officially unemployed, the true figure of those without work is closer to five million. According to official statistics, a mere 57 percent of the population is employed; in Germany, the figure is almost 70 percent.

The elections are being contested by well over a dozen parties and alliances. Despite this, the social hardship and concerns of the population find no expression in the election campaign. All the parties are agreed in principle that Monti's unpopular austerity measures must be continued and intensified.

## **Pier Luigi Bersani**

The most likely election winner is the centre-left alliance headed by Pier Luigi Bersani, the chair of the Democratic Party (PD), which is currently polling almost 40 percent. The PD is a successor to the Italian Communist Party (PCI), in which Bersani began his political career.

Over the last year, the PD has proved itself the most reliable prop of the Monti government. Bersani has repeatedly announced that he would continue Monti's austerity measures after the elections.

Earlier this month he told the *Washington Post* he would not change Monti's reforms, but would "add more reforms". He answered the question "should the foreign markets be afraid of the left returning to power in Italy" by saying no, "Markets have nothing to be afraid of".

When asked whether he would accept the strict budget and debt rules of the EU, Bersani answered unreservedly in the affirmative: "We were those who took Italy into the euro zone. It was Berlusconi who derailed things [with Europe]. We are the most pro-European party in our country. Not a socialist party, but a democratic one."

As President of the Emilia Romagna region, and transport and commerce minister in several Italian governments, Bersani has repeatedly demonstrated his reliability to the ruling class.

The most important partner of Bersani's PD is the "Sinistra Ecologia Libertà" (SEL, Left Ecological Liberty), an alliance of parties headed by by Nichi Vendola, the president of the Apulia region. Vendola was a founding member of *Rifondazione Comunista* (Communist Refoundation), another successor organisation to the PCI, before he concentrated intensively on environmental and identity politics and came to the head of the SEL. Through the alliance with Bersani, Vendola too unreservedly accepts the EU's austerity measures.

## **Silvio Berlusconi**

On the right, Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom Party (PDL) has agreed an alliance with the racist Lega Nord (Northern League), as well as two far-right parties, La Destra (The Right) and Fratelli d'Italia (the title of the Italian national anthem).

Berlusconi withdrew his support for the Monti government in November, forcing early elections. The 76-year old billionaire, against whom there are currently several ongoing trials for economic and sex crimes, is reacting both to his own problems as well as the growing discontent of his voters. These mainly come from the middle class and have been hard hit by Monti's austerity measures.

Following Monti's resignation, Berlusconi offered to make him the lead candidate of his electoral alliance, which Monti refused. Since then, Berlusconi has been moving ever further to the right, conducting a right-wing populist election campaign, including fierce attacks on the European Union and the German government. He has promised Francesco Storace, the candidate of the neo-fascist La Destra his support in the elections for president of the Latium region, which includes the capital Rome.

For many years Berlusconi collaborated with the xenophobic Lega Nord, which advocates more autonomy for northern Italy. The renewal of this pact is based on horse trading; the Northern League is supporting Berlusconi in the parliamentary elections, and he is supporting the Lega in the regional elections in the North.

Pundits give Berlusconi's electoral alliance few chances in the parliamentary elections. With 25 percent, he is trailing far behind Bersani's centre-left alliance in the polls. However, things look different in the elections to the second chamber. Here, seats are distributed not according to the national results but are decided regionally. Should Berlusconi win a majority in enough northern and southern regions, he can influence or even block future government policies.

## Mario Monti

After initial hesitation, the previously non-partisan Mario Monti has decided to establish his own electoral alliance, "Agenda Monti for Italy". The economics professor, Goldman Sachs advisor and former EU Commissioner is being supported by the Christian Democratic Centre Union (UDC), the Vatican, Ferrari boss and former president of the employers' association Luca di Montezemolo, and the former leader of the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale, Gianfranco Fini.

Monti's participation in the election campaign is above all for tactical reasons. He is regarded as having few prospects of success. His electoral alliance is lagging in the polls at 15 percent. However, Monti could ensure a safe majority for Bersani's centre-left alliance, so that it does not have to rely on the votes of uncertain protest groups.

It is also not to be excluded that Bersani may forgo the post of head of government in favour of Monti. This was how the PD previously helped Romano Prodi, whose biography is very similar to Monti's, become head of government. Prodi was also a professor of economics, EU Commissioner and a safe pair of hands for the banks, and came from the Christian Democratic camp. Monti might also become finance minister in a Bersani government.

## Beppe Grillo

Monti's alliance is polling approximately the same as the protest movement Five Star of the comedian Beppe Grillo. Last summer, it reached 20 percent in the polls, but since then its results have dropped, since it has nothing to offer other than tirades against corrupt politicians and promises of more transparency, and is visibly drifting to the right. Grillo himself is accused of leading his movement in an authoritarian and high-handed manner.

## Antonio Ingroia and Rifondazione

A new "left" party alliance has been established under the name *Rivoluzione Civile* (Citizens Revolution). It is headed by Antonio Ingroia, who has a reputation as a successful anti-Mafia fighter. In 1992, he replaced two investigatory magistrates in Palermo who had been murdered by the Mafia, and later fought organised crime on behalf of the UN in Guatemala.

Ingroia's alliance is supported by the "Italy of Values" party led by former state attorney Antonio di Pietro, by the Greens and by Communist Refoundation (*Rifondazione Comunista*). According to Rifondazione leader Paolo Ferrero, the new alliance's main objectives are "the defence and revival of democracy, and the struggle against neo-liberal policies".

"Italy of Values" is a free-market party. On the European level it is allied with the German Free Democratic Party. It was previously in an alliance with Bersani's Democratic Party, and supported the governments of Romano Prodi.

It is noteworthy that Rifondazione Comunista has joined the new

alliance. It underscores that the most important task for Rifondazione is to strangle every social movement of the working class.

The organisation, which emerged from the Italian Communist Party, was praised in the 1990s by pseudo-left groups throughout Europe as a model for new, left party. In reality, it played an important role at that time to create a majority for several centre-left governments that carried out fierce attacks against the working class.

In 2008, the second Prodi government collapsed and Rifondazione, which had held a ministerial post, broke into several wings. Now it is turning towards an alliance that advocates right-wing positions on social questions, and advocates a law-and-order campaign against the Mafia and corruption.

The concentration on these questions serves to divert from the urgent class questions, and hide the fact that all of the parties in the election support anti-working class austerity measures. In the name of fighting corruption, crime and terrorism, the state is given increased powers it then uses against the working class to violently suppress all opposition to the austerity measures.

Meanwhile, with the exception of Berlusconi's PDL, all the parties have placed the fight against corruption, for the rule of law and for democracy at the centre of their election campaigns.

Grillo's Five Star movement does not speak about any other topic. Bersani has appointed Pietro Grasso, the state attorney in Palermo who brought some of the most feared Mafia bosses to court, to his campaign team and wants to appoint him as minister of justice. To the same end, Monti has appointed Stefano Dambruoso, a former Milan prosecutor and expert on Islamic terrorism.

Following a year of rule in Italy by a technocratic government lacking all democratic legitimation, the elections do not herald a return to democracy. Workers, the unemployed, young people and pensioners have no way to defend their social rights and gains at the ballot box.

In addition, the exceedingly complicated and opaque election law is highly undemocratic. It was introduced in 2005 by the then Berlusconi government to serve its purposes, and despite repeated promises has never since been amended.

Of the 630 parliamentary seats in the House of Deputies, 55 percent are automatically granted to the party alliance which receives the most votes at national level. The remaining seats are then distributed according to the national share of the vote; whereby party alliances have to clear a 10 percent hurdle, parties not in an alliance a hurdle of 4 percent, and parties belonging to an alliance one of 2 percent.

The Senate seats are allocated according to the regional election results. The strongest alliance in a region is awarded 55 percent of the available Senate seats for that region, while different rules apply to the minimum vote required for representation than in the House of Deputies. Voters to the House of Deputies must be at least 18 years old, and 25 years old to vote for the Senate.

The lack of any progressive social alternative and the undemocratic election law guarantees that the result will in no way reflect the interests and social needs of the great majority of the population. Growing social tensions and violent class conflicts will be the result.



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