

Italian Senate expels Silvio Berlusconi

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On Wednesday, the Italian Senate voted by 192 to 113 to expel former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. As a result of a conviction last August for tax fraud, Berlusconi is now banned from holding public office.

The 77-year old billionaire has also lost his parliamentary immunity. In February next year, three further trials against him will be resumed, including the so-called “Ruby trial” for prostitution with a minor and another for bribing a senator.

Wednesday’s decision was preceded by a Senate session that was both stormy and lengthy. It began with dozens of amendments being tabled by Berlusconi loyalists. It grew increasingly volatile and nearly ended in physical violence between supporters of the newly reformed Forza Italia and Berlusconi opponents in the Democratic Party (PD) and Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement (M5S).

Berlusconi, who was not present at the session, had called on his supporters to demonstrate in front of his villa in Rome, Palazzo Grazioli, where he appeared on a stage decked in a sea of flags in the Italian colours—red, green and white—and pathetically declaimed, “This is a bitter day, a day of mourning for democracy. We will not surrender.” Pledging to remain active in politics, he said, “There are other leaders who are not parliamentarians.”

Last weekend he described his expulsion from the Senate as political persecution and part of a “coup,” indirectly appealing to President Giorgio Napolitano to pardon him, although he did not ask him directly. Napolitano refused immediately.

Only recently Berlusconi brought back to life his old party Forza Italia, which had served his political ascent twenty years ago. But his former confidante Angelino Alfano, deputy prime minister and interior minister in the current government, refused to play along because he wants to avoid new elections. Together with the four other incumbent ministers and 57 MPs from

Berlusconi’s previous party PdL, Alfano founded the Nuovo Centrodestra (New Centre-Right Party).

Although Alfano and thirty senators belonging to his faction voted against Berlusconi’s expulsion on Wednesday, they left no doubt about their determination to keep the government of Enrico Letta (PD) in office. Alfano has called on the Letta government to act decisively, saying it now has no excuse for putting planned reforms on the back burner.

Guglielmo Epifani, leader of the Democratic Party, declared that the Senate had only done its duty. The rule of law had prevailed, he said. Those now talking about a “coup” were behaving “dangerously and irresponsibly.”

Prime Minister Letta said the way was now open for the rapid implementation of the “reforms.” The Italian government was now stronger and more determined, he added.

Many international newspapers hailed the banning of Berlusconi from all official offices. This “overwhelming” man had dominated Italian politics for twenty years, wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Now the “hope for a grand renaissance” and a new beginning was germinating.

Such an evaluation, however, overestimates the significance of Berlusconi. His dominant role was primarily a result of the decline of the official labour movement.

For decades in the postwar period, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the largest in Western Europe, had dominated the Italian workers’ movement. Although it loyally supported the Italian state, it was never in government, with the exception of a short period at the end of World War II.

The Christian Democrats had ruled almost unchallenged for five decades and developed a tight network based on nepotism and corruption, in which the Mafia, the Vatican and right-wing conspiracies

hatched by the intelligence agencies played a role.

When this state of affairs blew apart in an enormous corruption scandal twenty years ago, the PCI rapidly junked its communist trappings and established what became the Democratic Party out of the ruins of the old parties. Flanking cover was provided by a split-off, Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation), which brought the petty-bourgeois “left” into its ranks.

Over the following twenty years, Italy repeatedly witnessed the same game: a government led or supported by the Democratic Party, with the support of Rifondazione, implemented “reforms” benefiting Italian capitalism at the expense of the working class, while Berlusconi posed as an opponent of the establishment, the state and its judges.

Berlusconi’s resignation from political office will not alter this pattern. The Letta government is preparing to impose an austerity budget in 2014. To satisfy the corporations and banks, it is attacking the working class with ever-greater brutality. At the insistence of the European Union, Letta has sharpened the austerity measures included in his budget.

State spending will be cut by over 12 billion euros next year, indirect and sales taxes raised, wages in the public sector frozen and vacancies left unfilled. The government will privatise eight state enterprises, including the shipbuilder Fincantieri, parts of the national airline Alitalia, the post office and the oil corporation ENI, threatening thousands more jobs.

Italy has been in recession for five years. Youth unemployment has climbed above 40 percent, and poverty among the elderly has increased dramatically. Five million Italians live in absolute poverty; six million are unemployed.

Letta’s government is extremely unstable. To push through the austerity budget it has to rely on a coalition with Alfano’s right-wing rump party. On Tuesday, Letta finally won a vote of confidence in the Senate thanks to the votes of Alfano’s faction.

In addition to Berlusconi’s PdL, the third coalition partner, Scelta Civica (Citizen’s Choice), of Mario Monti, has also broken apart.

The Democratic Party itself is deeply divided. The mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, is demanding an end to the coalition with Alfano and is calling for early elections. In contrast, Letta wants to continue the government until the end of the parliamentary term.

There is a good chance that Renzi could replace Epifani as party leader in primaries on December 8. Renzi has the support of a large section of Democrats comprised of functionaries of the former PCI, such as ex-Rifondazione leader Nichi Vendola.

In this situation, the task is posed of building a new revolutionary party to prepare the working class for the coming struggles. Under conditions of decades of betrayals by the PCI, its successors, and the trade unions, the dangers emanating from the right-wing populist parties are growing.

Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, which still possesses a considerable base of support, is trying to reposition itself as an opposition party. On Tuesday, it announced its resignation from the government coalition and has since refused to support the 2014 austerity budget, which Berlusconi describes as a “lazybones stability pact.”

The rise of Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement eighteen months ago shows the deep frustration that is spreading in the population, which has not yet found a progressive means of expression.



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