

Italian ruling parties defeat far-right Lega in Emilia-Romagna elections

Peter Schwarz
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In the regional elections in the Italian province of Emilia-Romagna on Sunday, with 43.6 percent, the candidate of the extreme right-wing Lega, Lucia Borgonzoni, was clearly defeated by the former regional president Stefano Bonaccini of the Democrats (PD), who came in at 51.4 percent.

Lega head Matteo Salvini personally made a massive commitment to the election campaign, declaring the vote to be critical for Italy. An election victory in the region around Bologna, which has been ruled for 75 years by the Communist Party and its successors, was to be the prelude to overthrowing the government in Rome and forcing new elections. “First we’ll send them home on Sunday, and then we’ll kick out the government,” Salvini had promised. On Monday, he would “demand early elections.”

This has failed for the time being, but the rise of the right-wing extremists has not been stopped, contrary to what many media comments claim. The lifespan of the shaky government in Rome will perhaps be extended by a few weeks or months, but the policies of the two governing parties—the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Democrats (PD)—are the main reason for the rise of the extreme right and will continue to strengthen it.

When Salvini took over the leadership of the Lega Nord in 2013, it was a separatist regional party that had discredited itself in several governments as the junior partner of media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, and only managed to win 4 percent in the parliamentary elections. The technocratic and centre-left governments, which have governed since with the support of the Democrats, have brought about an unprecedented social disaster, cutting pensions, lowering wages and pushing unemployment to record European levels.

Salvini knew how to make the most of this. He

developed Lega into a national party to appeal to the anger and frustration of voters with chauvinist and xenophobic demagoguery.

His breakthrough finally came with the help of the Five Star Movement of comedian Beppe Grillo, which became the strongest party in the 2018 parliamentary elections with 33 percent. M5S, which had won support with their fierce attacks on the political establishment, formed a coalition with the most right-wing of all the establishment parties and made Salvini interior minister. Although Lega has only half as many members of parliament as the Five Stars, Salvini soon proved to be a strongman in government. While Lega’s poll ratings doubled, those of M5S halved.

Last summer, Salvini quit the government in the hope that new elections would make Lega the leading party. But his manoeuvre failed because the Five Stars, fearing new elections, joined forces with the Democrats, whom they had previously described as their worst opponents.

Since then, Salvini has benefited from the anti-working-class policies of the Five-Star/Democrats government. Of the 10 regional elections held since March 2018, Lega and its right-wing allies have won nine. In Calabria, where elections were also held at the weekend, the Lega-backed right-wing candidate Jole Santelli defeated the previous PD regional president by 55 to 30 percent.

In the national polls, Lega leads with 33 percent, ahead of the Democrats with 18 and the Five Stars with 15 percent. In fourth place, with over 10 percent, is another extreme right-wing party, the Fratelli d’Italia, which openly professes its support for fascism.

The Democrats owe their electoral success in Emilia-Romagna primarily to the Sardines movement, which mobilised tens of thousands to protest against Salvini

with appeals to anti-fascist sentiments and traditions. As a result, voter turnout rose from 38 percent in 2014 to 68 percent at the weekend, benefiting the centre-left candidate. PD leader Nicola Zingaretti expressly thanked the Sardines for their contribution to the election victory.

The PD's coalition partner in Rome, the Five Stars, however, suffered a debacle. While they had received just under 33 percent of the votes in the parliamentary elections two years ago, they fell below 5 percent in the election for the Emilia-Romagna regional parliament. In Calabria, too, they received only 6 percent.

The party is in meltdown. Luigi di Maio, currently still foreign minister, resigned from the Five-Star presidency four days before the election. Beppe Grillo, who still pulls the strings in the background, has announced a congress that will decide on the further course of the Five Stars in March after the regional elections in Marche, Campania and Puglia. At that point at the latest, the current government could be at an end—under circumstances that are very advantageous for Salvini.

In a statement published on Facebook after the election, the Sardines celebrated the election result in Emilia-Romagna as a great success. “Today we know that we can be not only ‘against’, but also ‘better,’” they wrote, “and we can do this by different means than the professional propagandists: free, human, creative and empathetic. The experience of Emilia-Romagna shows that the Sardines act like oxygen.”

In fact, the Sardines are nothing more than a fig leaf for the anti-working-class policies of the Democrats, which are paving the way for the right wing and fascists. The indignation about Salvini's fascist tirades, which brought many to the Sardines' demonstrations, is undoubtedly genuine. But the Sardines are steering this outrage into a political dead end.

They explicitly refuse to appeal to the anger and discontent of the working class, which is entering into fierce class struggles worldwide. In their announcements, there is not a word about social inequality, militarism and increasing the repressive powers of the state. Instead, they plead for a more civilized form of politics based on state institutions rather than on the antics in the social media; for “a politics with less shouting,” as one demonstrator said.

Such appeals to placidity, humanity and reason

cannot stop the advance of the ultra-right, which is taking place not only in Italy but all over the world. The ruling class is again resorting to the means of dictatorship, fascism and war, because otherwise it cannot suppress the enormous social tensions and international conflicts of capitalist society. Only a movement of the international working class that combines the struggle against fascism and war with a socialist programme to overthrow capitalism can stop this dangerous development.



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