

Italian regional elections: Political elite shifts further right

Peter Schwarz
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Elections for the presidents and parliaments in six of Italy's 18 regions were held on Sunday and Monday. The first election since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic was seen as a test for the government in Rome, a coalition of the Five Star Movement (M5S), Democratic Party (PD), and several smaller parties under the leadership of non-aligned Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

The media's main focus was on Tuscany, which has been governed by the PD and its predecessors for 50 years. The Lega, led by Matteo Salvini, ran the 33-year-old Susanna Ceccardi, a young star in the far-right party, and there was a great deal of speculation that she could win the election. This turned out to be mistaken. The PD's candidate, Eugenio Giani, finished with 48.6 percent of the vote, well ahead of Ceccardi, who received 40.5 percent.

Conte and the PD therefore celebrated the election victory as a confirmation of their government and pledged to decisively pursue the policies of "reforms." The result was also observed with relief in Brussels. The Conte government is firmly committed to the European Union and has pledged to use the EU's coronavirus bailout package, a large portion of which will flow to Italy, to fundamentally restructure the country's economy. "Reform" is a euphemism for social spending cuts, public sector layoffs, tax cuts for the rich, and further attacks on the working class.

A closer look at the election results produces a totally different picture to the one painted by Brussels and Rome. Mounting anger and outrage among the population, which can find no outlet in the existing political channels, coincides with a sharp shift of the ruling elite even further to the right.

Of the six regions where regional presidents were elected, the right-wing won four, three of which they had previously held. They therefore hold power in 13 out of 18 regions, compared to just three four years ago.

It is noteworthy that a landslide victory by a right-wing extremist candidate in Marche, a region between Tuscany and the Adriatic, was hardly noticed by the European media, never mind treated as an alarming development.

Francesco Acquaroli, the candidate of a right-wing alliance including the Lega, Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the Fratelli d'Italia, won the election for the regional president by a wide margin with 49 percent of the vote. The region was previously governed by the centre-left parties.

Acquaroli is a member of the Fratelli d'Italia (FDI), a right-wing extremist party packed with fascists, neo-Nazis and members of the Identitarian Movement. He is an admirer of Benito Mussolini, who ruled Italy as a fascist dictator for 21 years. Last year, he took part in an official dinner to commemorate the "March on Rome" organised by the FDI's provincial secretary. Mussolini's "March on Rome" in October 1922 marked the beginning of the fascist dictatorship.

Georgia Meloni, the 43-year-old leader of the FDI, is increasingly emerging as a challenger on the far-right to Lega leader Salvini. He has been weakened politically ever since his decision in the summer of 2019 to leave the governing coalition with M5S in hopes of emerging strengthened from early elections. But instead of agreeing to new elections, M5S reached a coalition deal with the Democrats.

Meloni is an ultra-right figure, agitates against immigrants and financial speculators (above all those of Jewish origin, like George Soros), is a professed supporter of "god, fatherland, and family," opposes abortion and LGBT rights, and invokes a national identity. Her declared goal is a strong, authoritarian state where security has priority over freedom, an "illiberal democracy" on the Hungarian model.

Meloni began her political career as a 15-year-old in a right-wing youth group and was Youth Minister in Berlusconi's government in 2008. She is firmly integrated into the political establishment, which has no problem with her fascist ideas. Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which cooperates at the European level with the German governing Christian Democrats and Christian Social Union, stood joint lists of candidates in the regional elections with the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia.

Berlusconi, who was Italian Prime Minister four times

between 1994 and 2011, continues to play only a minor role. The 84-year-old was in hospital with coronavirus and Forza Italia crawled to 6 percent in the polls. His most important service has been to assist in the rise and building the reputations of the fascists, which he has done since forming a coalition for the first time with the Mussolini-successor party MSI in 1994.

The Fratelli d'Italia stands in this fascist tradition. In contrast to the Lega, which emerged out of the separatist regional party Lega Nord and continues to contain strong regionalist tendencies, it advocates a strong national state.

The Lega continues to have a strong presence in the north. In Venetia, regional president Luca Zaia defended his post with a record 76.8 percent share of the vote. He is seen as a strong internal rival to Salvini and is backed by sections of big business, including the Benetton concern. His election victory was in large part thanks to the fact that through the introduction of red zones, widespread testing and contact tracing he was able to contain the pandemic relatively quickly and prevent a catastrophe like in neighbouring Lombardy.

The major loser in the regional elections was M5S. In March 2018, it emerged from the parliamentary elections as the strongest party, with almost one-third of the votes. This time around, the party managed to achieve double-digit totals in two of the six regions, and even there it suffered heavy losses. In Apulia, for example, Five Star received 11 percent, compared to 45 percent at the parliamentary elections.

The rise of the Five Star Movement was closely bound up with popular anger towards the established parties, which, regardless if they were right or left, took turns in government and always enforced attacks on the working class. The comedian Beppe Grillo, the party's founder, appeared in market squares to denounce and curse the political establishment. Although Five Star's programme was eclectic, it was in essence right-wing. They did not call capitalism into question but instead demanded a downsizing of the state, which ultimately meant massive social spending cuts.

They had barely won the election when the right-wing character of M5S was made clear. They formed a coalition with Salvini's Lega, which took over the Interior Minister and played a dominant role in the government. The brutality with which the government treated refugees, its refusal to allow overcrowded ships to land, and its acceptance of the drowning of thousands in the Mediterranean, permanently discredited the Five Star Movement.

They are now celebrating as a major victory the fact that 70 percent of the voters supported a proposal in a referendum held simultaneously to reduce the size of

parliament. Only 600 deputies will sit in Italy's two parliamentary chambers, compared to the current 945, and pay for deputies will be cut.

During the 2018 parliamentary election, Five Star promised to reduce "waste and the cost of politics," and it campaigned in favour of the referendum. The vote in their favour by over two-thirds expresses the widespread distrust of establishment politics. "The vote for a reduction in the size of parliament is a no-confidence vote against the country's politicians, with whom the Italians have been fed up for years," wrote German daily *Die Welt*.

But this distrust no longer identifies with M5S, as shown by its election results. In addition, a reduction in the size of parliament will do nothing to change the government's reactionary policies. It is instead likely to contribute to the strengthening of the powers of the executive and thus a step in the direction of an authoritarian state.

Italy resembles a social powder keg. Over 300,000 people have been infected with coronavirus due to the government's irresponsible policies, and 36,000 have died. Unemployment is at 10 percent, the third highest rate in Europe. Young people in particular cannot find work. The economy is in freefall. Bitter class struggles are inevitable. But they require a political perspective and orientation, without which the rotten social conditions will lead to a rise of fascism.

Neither Fratelli d'Italia or the Lega yet represents a fascist mass movement. But they pose a genuine threat. Only an independent movement of the working class, fighting to put an end to capitalism and for a socialist programme, can stop this danger.



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