

Sorrowful elections for the Italian left

Friday 2 April 2010, by [ZULUETA Tana de](#) (Date first published: 31 March 2010).

As protest votes lurched rightward, Berlusconi's close victory and the loss of leftwing regions signal Italy's turn to authoritarianism.

For anyone who had hoped for an Italian repeat of the spectacular gains of the left we just saw in France, the latest round of regional elections was a bruising disappointment. So bad, that on the night of the results the Democratic party leader Pierluigi Bersani cancelled his press conference at party headquarters, saying he had to think things over.

For Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing coalition, bracing as they were for a predictable downturn in the midst of embarrassing scandals – involving, as usual, the prime minister himself – not to speak of rising unemployment and other economic pains, the results were quite simply wonderful news. They were partying deep into the night in Rome's Piazza del Popolo after the right-wing candidate, Renata Polverini, snatched a very close victory in the city's Lazio region.

"I worked for it, it's my victory," Berlusconi is reported to have snapped when the last regional results came in. The prime minister will no doubt bask in the reprieve the vote has offered, pointing to the receding left in Italy's regions as proof of the popular mandate needed both to carry on governing and, as he has promised, rewrite the constitution in a more authoritarian mould. But the real winners of this regional poll were undoubtedly further north. One of the best results of all was that of the Northern League candidate Luca Zaia, who swept to victory in the Veneto region with just over 60% of the vote. The Northern League, with its xenophobic bent, is now the largest single party in that region. Roberto Cota, another Lega man, won, unexpectedly, in another close race in the Piemonte region, also part of Italy's industrial heartlands. In Lombardy, Italy's biggest region and a longstanding conservative stronghold, the results were never in doubt: the outgoing Berlusconi ally sailed comfortably back into office – thanks to the support of the Northern League, who won over 26% of the vote in the region which was the party's birthplace.

"The left has been wiped out of the north", gloated Umberto Bossi, leader and founder of the Lega Nord. While Berlusconi's Party of Liberty, the result of a merger with the post-fascist National Alliance, slipped under 30% of the vote in the regional elections, Bossi's party has grown and now looms very large throughout the richer north. "It is as if Bossi had snapped up all the protest votes we failed to catch," mused a disconsolate Democrat senator on the night of the count. It is still unclear just what Bossi will claim as his pound of flesh from Berlusconi. There may be some loud talk of secession on the part of the three northern regions Bossi has renamed "Padania". The toughest requests, however, may concern taxation, which would mean reduced transfers to the poorer south if the north was to hang on to its much larger revenues – a prospect Berlusconi probably fears far more than the noisy demands for a "Padania libera!"

In Sicily, where there was no vote last Sunday, the president of the regional assembly has already founded his own breakaway party, with the support of some powerful former Berlusconi party allies. Holding Italy together in these lean times will prove no simple challenge.

On the left, the most lucid comment on the elections was the one made by Nichi Vendola, whose victory in the southern Puglia region was something of a personal triumph. Vendola, a former communist whose candidacy had initially been challenged by a Democratic party leadership seeking to establish its moderate credentials, has had the honesty to call these elections – in which six out of eleven regions formerly run by leftwing administrators have been lost to the right – “a heavy defeat for the left”. He has collectively branded the leadership of his centre-left partners as “inadequate” and called for a thorough review of their political strategy. With three years to go until the next elections, they will be able to do so at leisure.

Berlusconi, in the meantime, has promised immediate action. His first objectives? To pull the teeth of an over-independent judiciary and provide a gag-law for the press, with the excuse of protecting privacy and limiting phone taps. It looks as though the Italian left has blown its last chance to stop the demolition gang.

Tana de Zulueta

P.S.

* From the guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 31 March 2010 14.00 BST:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/31/italy-berlusconi-elections-right>