

Italian elections: A first balance sheet

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Legitimate satisfaction with having beaten the Berlusconi government cannot justify triumphalism on the Union's part, nor inspire an optimistic outlook as to the recent national elections. The incredible division in Italy, the House of Freedom's numerical success in the Senate, a margin of victory of scarcely 25,000 votes in the House, due to a majority bonus roughly challenged, are signs that lead us to a considered judgement that is neither sectarian nor propagandistic.

First of all, while it is true that Berlusconi has been defeated, his coalition and Berlusconism as a "biography of Italy" haven't been beaten. This is a significant analytical element, as it impinges on the Union's actual possibilities of governing.

Berlusconism has proven a formidable social and political bond that has enabled the leader of the right-wing forces to make an unexpected comeback. And above all, it shows how deeply marked Italy is by the mix of neoliberalism, populism, racism and clericalism that characterise the House of Freedom.

Its message, also influenced by US neoconservative culture, has attracted and motivated half of the electorate, and the majority of older voters, in an election with a high voting rate and a dramatic drop in the number of stay-at-home voters.

The Union has not proven an adequate option to beat the rightwing forces conclusively and undermine their cultural influence, social breeding ground and thus the strength of their forces.

On the centre-left, Prodi has affirmed plans for a democratic party emerging strengthened from the collapse of DS and Margherita in the Senate. However, these elections were a defeat for Prodi himself. He has not succeeded in staking out a place as an unchallenged leader, due to the defeat in the Senate that will have a significant impact on how the Government is formed.

Prodi's electoral campaign was a failure, with its emphasis on moderation and a healthy relationship with Confindustria (the employer association). It failed to grasp the social issues that could have brought about a collapse of the adversary front. While Berlusconi's strategy veered towards a radical, frontal attack to consolidate his own electorate and reduce the risk of abstentionism, the Union responded by faltering, taking one backward step after another in terms of tax policy and their very analysis of Italy, casting an eye towards the "powers-that-be" and downplaying radical elements that could be found in issues such as insecurity or taxation of financial investment earnings.

Giving in to these moderate thrusts turned against the liberal heart of the Union, DS and Margherita, which emerged as losers. Rifondazione's good showing in the Senate, despite a lacklustre showing in the House, and the generally good results of anti-neoliberal forces in the coalition, are signs of a desire for a leftist outlook that Union's general profile and Prodi's image itself do not adequately represent.

The elections also mark the high point and endpoint of a rigidly bipolar system. It is a high point, because never before has the vote represented a referendum for or against the ruling head of government to such an extent. Even the overnight wait as the last polls were counted and the 25,000-vote margin in the House are signs of this particularity.

But precisely due to these features, and a “bastard” electoral law, the confrontation between the two leaders and sides is a snapshot of an Italy exactly split in half, with both houses having a different majority (if only in terms of real figures) and thus with a blockage of the entire political system. This is grounds enough to support an end to the bipolar system, the introduction of an effective and more democratic, proportional representation law, if only like the German model, and the re-establishment of a normal political dialectic between different programmes and a number of leaderships.

Elections always give an indication, albeit a delayed one, of the relationship of forces in social terms and in terms of the class struggle. And this parameter clearly indicates that the phase of struggles and movements just behind us has no doubt put some dents into the Berlusconi myth, but not socially defeated it.

The rightwing bloc has exactly the same votes as five years ago and the defeat of Forza Italia [1] means a new internal balance of the alliance, tilting towards UDC [2]. The struggles and negotiations of the last five years have certainly indicated a change in direction with respect to the 1990s, but not to the extent of plotting out a clear alternative to neoliberalism and its social model. Thinking and encouraging others to think that Italy had changed and that waiting for Election Day was enough to register the change, has proven a dramatic error. The current mood is one of disorientation and the difficulty of finding a real outlet for hopes of change.

A belief that the political outcome was decisive in consolidating the movements of recent years has weighed upon these movements, weakening them. Now we bitterly take stock that along the road to social and political change there is still a long road ahead of us and many obstacles on the way. Furthermore, there was a lacklustre outcome in regions governed by the centre-left.

One year after the change announced by the regional elections, the rightwing has returned to government. Yet another demonstration that, to really achieve change, a social base and the capacity to rebuild a bloc for the alternative able to achieve a dynamic of transformation, especially from below. Thinking today that we can get around that by barricading ourselves in a “social minority” government could have dramatic effects on the development of the class struggle and for the very fate of PRC.

In this context the prospect opening up is far from ideal. The formation of an alternative government seems a very difficult task no longer and not only due to Prodi’s programmatic ambiguity or moderate forces within the centre-left, but also due to the objective strength that the rightwing forces have shown and their impact on the centre-left.

Italians waited late into the night to confirm Berlusconi’s defeat

Appeals to a centrist option have become stronger today. This can take various forms: concertation in election of the President of the Republic; the election of the presidents of both Houses; respect for a so-called “public accounts emergency” to which various spokespersons of the centre-left have alluded, and so on. For this reason, an eventual Prodi government will either have radical features with signs of obvious breaks with the past, or it will not last. Immediate signs of such breaks must include immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq, abrogation of Law 30, the Moratti and Bossi-Fini acts, a relaunch of the wage question and so on.

Pressure on our party will be extremely strong. Calls for a sense of responsibility and a strong appeal to coalition bonds will exert great pressure on PRC, forcing the party to respect the alliance and not give the right wing an opportunity to take revenge.

This could mean giving in to indigestible measures. Participation in such a government, in the many forms it could take, is a risk far greater than what we had feared in the past few months.

Rifondazione runs the risk of being bottled up in a political-institutional trap that we must find a way of getting out of. We must put radical content at centre stage, and not coalition ties.

This means Rifondazione must regain its own autonomy in terms of action. Social struggles must retake centre stage, as in the extraordinary outcome in France. The main issues in the upcoming phase remain those of the electoral campaign: immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq, abrogation of Law 30, the Moratti and Bossi-Fini acts, closing the CPT to taxation of financial investment income and concrete measures for income redistribution, including the reintroduction of a new sliding scale, a law on civil unions and measures for cleaning up the courts by going beyond a different justice depending on who is in court to equal justice for all (amnesty; drug laws...).

The choice of the next President of the Republic calls for particular autonomy, refusing candidacies linked to a neoliberal economic outlook and favouring those who express a solid commitment to the constitution, in particular article 11. In this context, there is the link to the referendum campaign to defeat the constitutional counter-reform - the centre-right's "devolution" and the electoral campaign for the upcoming local elections. Rifondazione's scores can be analysed in two ways. The exceptional outcome in the Senate is not matched at all in the House, with a score beneath the most recent European elections.

Certainly, in absolute terms there is a significant progress in a context in which all forces had the benefit of a higher voter turnout. However, the gap between the two votes remains, penalising the one where young people have more influence. There is a possible dual explanation: on the one hand, competition with the Olive Tree (Ulivo) slate, presented as an innovative, united approach, and Prodi, "further left" than the two slates, DS [3] and Margherita [4], standing separately for the Senate.

On the other, a spillover effect between votes for the Ulivo in the House and the "Together for the Union" slate in the Senate, and thus a displacement of votes for the PDCI [5] to the Rifondazione symbol, the only one with the hammer and sickle. We must ask to what extent an electoral campaign based on reliability rather than differentiation and the "added value" of PRC.

The outcome is not comforting for the European Left either, because PRC should have had the greatest appeal precisely in the presence of Ulivo's unitary slates. Instead, the PRC won votes in competition with DS and Margherita party slates, with a neutral presence of the "Together for the Union" slate. These attest to the vote for Rifondazione as a "party", its presence on the ground, its symbol, its political and media representation.

PRC has taken a leading role in this campaign, through its activists' energy and pressure, the presence and prestige of its structures in the regions, and its ability to "act as a party" Obviously this fact has not counterbalanced the weight of a highly mediatised electoral campaign, relying on TV exposure and spotlighting the leaders.

This distortion must be corrected via an internal discussion about the party and its role. In any case, alongside this passion and effort there is also a grace period through an electoral campaign that has pushed internal differences to the background, spotlighting unity of action and feeling that still makes PRC a different party from the others.

NOTES

[1] Berlusconi's party

[2] Union of Christian and Centre Democrats - A party coming out of the former Christian Democrats (elements of the Christian Democrats are also in the Union).

[3] Democrats of the Left- coming out of the right wing of the former Italian Communist Party.

[4] Daisy-Democracy is Freedom - a liberal-centrist member of the Union.

[5] Party of Italian Communists - split from Rifondazione over its support for the first Prodi government, and generally made up of old "orthodox" (Stalinist) CP members.

P.S.

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* Salvatore Cannavò is a member of the national political committee of the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) and deputy editor of the PRC's daily newspaper, "Liberazione".

* Franco Turigliatto is a member of the leadership of the Communist Party of Refoundation (PRC), responsible for its intervention in big companies, and an activist in the current Bandiera Rossa, which organizes PRC members who identify with the Fourth International.