

Italy: Election success puts Communist Refoundation in hot seat

Friday 5 May 2006, by [NICHOLS Dick](#) (Date first published: 3 May 2006).

In the April 9-10 Italian general elections, outgoing prime minister and media super-boss Silvio Berlusconi just failed to pull off a miracle win for his centre-right coalition the House of Freedoms. The centre-right came to within 25,000 votes of defeating the centre-left Union, led by former European Commission president Romano Prodi, in the Chamber of Deputies (the Italian lower house) and actually polled 425,000 more votes in the Senate.

Ironically, only a controversial new electoral law introduced by Berlusconi sealed the win for the Union - by handing the winning coalition in the Chamber an extra packet of seats to ensure "governability", and by granting Italians abroad a vote, which got the Union across the line in the Senate.

How could a government that has presided over five years of economic stagnation, sent troops to Iraq against 70% popular opposition, been neck-deep in corruption scandals and provoked waves of mass protest, come so close to surviving?

Berlusconi's election campaign was like an episode in the "war on terror". He claimed that a victory for the "reds" would mean soaring taxes, ballooning budget deficits and interest rates, the collapse of the hard-won competitiveness of Italian industry, a plague of gay marriages, floods of "illegal" African and Muslim migrants, and communists in the halls of power. With this mix of neoliberalism, populism, racism and clericalism (which reached its climax with the claim that in Mao's China, babies had been boiled down for fertiliser), Italy's richest capitalist terrified the right's social base into voting, helping produce an unprecedentedly low abstention rate on polling day.

The response of the Union's leaders to Berlusconi the attack-dog was to become increasingly moderate, downplaying their own policies against labour-market deregulation and corporate tax evasion, and even soft-pedalling their analysis of the crimes of Berlusconi's "Italy Inc." regime.

Yet while almost losing Prodi the election, this defensive response also provoked a shift to the left within the vote for the parties of the Union. It was as if a growing portion of the Union's support base wanted to indicate that it didn't want Prodi's standard "social-liberal" alternative to Berlusconi's neoliberal barbarism.

The biggest winner was the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC), whose Senate vote rose by 836,000 votes (from 5.1% in 2001 to 7.4%), but there were also gains for smaller radical forces within the Union such as the Party of Italian Communists and the Rose in the Fist.

Although almost sacrificed by its election campaign, the Union's win would not have been possible without the years of mass protest against Berlusconi (including the millions who have mobilised against his alliance with US President George Bush and British PM Tony Blair). However, mass protest against neoliberalism and war has not remotely been transformed into a shared view within the Union of what the alternative to Berlusconi's reign should be.

At the same time, "Berlusconism" is far from being defeated as a social force. Even disregarding the magnate's megalomaniac manoeuvring (refusing to recognise the results of the poll, already campaigning to become the next Italian president), the centre-right's bloc of support is as strong as it was at the 2001 election, with the biggest vote shifts on the right being within that bloc.

This gridlock can only be broken if millions of Union voters have a different experience of this Prodi government compared to the last version (in 1996, when the PRC, after initially supporting Prodi, withdrew in protest over his labour market deregulation plans). It will also have to be different from ruling regional centre-left governments (the experience of which helped boost the vote for the right at this poll).

The prospects are not immediately promising. Not only because of the ambiguity of Prodi's own program and the balance of forces within the Union, but also because of powerful institutional pressures for a centrist "solution", an Italian version of Germany's Grand Coalition. There is also already talk of a government budget crisis ("when we got there, the cupboard was bare"), of the kind that would require "postponement" of the more radical parts of the Union program.

The April 9-10 election result increases the pressure on the PRC hugely. A vote against any measures of the new government could produce a revival of the right. On the other hand, unconditional submission to Union coalition discipline would surely reduce the party to a fifth wheel on an Italian version of Australia's Hawke-Keating government.

The tests will begin right away. Will Prodi move immediately to withdraw Italian forces from Iraq? Will he keep an Italian contingent in Afghanistan? Will his government repeal Law 30 (which compels people on welfare to take almost any job they are offered) and the Bossi-Fini law (which makes entry into Italy without a work permit illegal, even if the "illegal" is persecuted in his or her country of origin)? Will it legalise gay and lesbian marriage against the hysterical threats of the pope?

On April 29, PRC secretary Fausto Bertinotti was elected speaker of the Chamber, even as the PRC debates whether it will take positions in the government. *Liberazione*, the PRC newspaper, speaks of the possibility of Bertinotti using the position to strengthen the autonomy of parliament and to help "relaunch that democracy and real political participation ... which Italy needs like bread".

A daydream? The PRC's general line is to keep the movements alive and strong so as to pressure Prodi to the left. How to carry out such a strategy without opening the gate to the right nor succumbing to the blackmail of the moderate wing of the Union will require immense political skill.

P.S.

* From Green Left Weekly, May 3, 2006.

* Dick Nichols is the managing editor of *Seeing Red*.