Il Bruttopaese

George De Stefano (May 04, 2008)

Reflections on the Italian Elections

There’s an American saying about gullibility that bears repeating in light of Italy’s recent elections.

“Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”

What do you say when a nation decides to be fooled three times?

After two stints in office, Silvio Berlusconi has been re-elected as Italy's premier. What does this tell us about the Italian electorate?

The New York Times, in its editorial after the elections, noted that Berlusconi's previous administrations produced "shockingly meager achievements." This is like saying that George W. Bush is inarticulate – true, but hardly the point.

If the "paper of record" was laughably clueless about the meaning of Berlusconi's return to power, other publications were far more perspicacious.

Martin Jacques, a correspondent for the British daily, The Guardian, noted that "The emergence of Silvio Berlusconi as the dominant political figure in Italy is the single most depressing event in Europe over the last decade."

The return to power of the man that satirist Beppe Grillo memorably christened "il psiconano" (the psychodwarf) suggests to Jacques that Italy today may not even be a democracy in any but formal terms.

"True, Berlusconi has been elected via the ballot box," Jacques wrote. "But when he controls all the major private TV channels and has reshaped the state's channels in his own image, while also owning several newspapers, then the dice are hugely loaded in his favor."

Given Berlusconi's near-total control of Italian media, Italy's par condicio law, which was intended to give equal media access to parties across the political spectrum, is a bit like treating metastasizing cancer with tea tree oil. But even this attempt at media balance is too much for Berlusconi, who calls par condicio "undemocratic" and vows to get rid of it.

Jacques also cites the corrosive influence of big money on Italian politics. "Democracy depends on a separation of economic and political power. The growth of lobby interests in the United States has significantly weakened that separation. So has the rise of the rich as the main funders of Britain's two main parties. But the degeneration in these cases is on nothing like the same scale as Italy."

"Essentially, what Berlusconi represents is the conquest and occupation of the state by private interests. It is the underlying weakness and lack of legitimacy of the Italian state in the popular mind that makes this possible," Jacques concludes.

A Case for Lesser Evilism

I've heard all the explanations for the victory of Berlusconi and his rightist allies, the xenophobic Lega Nord and the "post"-Fascist Alleanza Nazionale. Most center on the utter failure of the Left – mainly the political parties, but also the unions and the left-leaning civil society movements -- to mount a credible challenge to the Right. The blame game is in full swing right now in Italy.

Certainly the Italian electorate had good reasons to be angry with the ineffectual and pusillanimous center-left government headed by the hapless Romano Prodi. Its many failures have been amply documented.

The ire of left-wing voters was, in my view, particularly well-founded. There are times when strategic alliances between leftists and centrists are appropriate, even necessary. But the leftist parties who joined Prodi, hoping to push him in a more progressive direction, just ended up compromised and discredited with their own constituencies.

Why would leftists support a government that failed to re-write Berlusconi's labor laws, that voted to continue to finance the military presence in Afghanistan and to send troops to Lebanon, that increased military spending by more than 20 percent in two years and approved the building of an American military base in Vicenza despite strong local, and national, opposition?

The center-left administration didn't drop the ball only on these critical concerns. In the face of the fierce and even shockingly bigoted opposition of rightist and Catholic forces – some of the latter within Prodi's own government – even mild proposals to extend some legal recognition to Italian gay couples and got nowhere. Everywhere else in Western Europe, the rights of sexual minorities are protected by law. But not in Italy, where the cult of La Famiglia and a masculinist culture still prevail.

Still, if ever a case could be made for "lesser evilism," the Italian elections made a compelling one. Even the considerable failures of the center-left hardly justify electing a government of crooks, racists, and fascists. And make no bones about it – that's exactly who will govern Italy.

What seems closer to the truth is that Italians were not fooled by Berlusconi. More than half the electorate willingly bought what he had to sell.

What Lies Ahead
And what they'll get for their votes won't be pretty.

The culture of cronyism and clientelism that has deformed Italian political and economic life will flourish unchecked.

The fight against the Mafia will be impeded and undermined, as during Berlusconi's previous administrations. As The Nation's correspondent Frederika Randall reported, "The most chilling moment during Italy's election campaign came when Silvio Berlusconi declared that his onetime factotum Vittorio Mangano-- a Cosa Nostra boss later condemned to life imprisonment for two murders -- was 'a hero.' It was as close as he could get to making an outright promise to Italy's Mafia that they would have a free hand if he were elected."

Italy needs immigrants, given its low birth rate and the unwillingness of many Italians to do work they believe is beneath them. But immigration policy will be harsh and punitive and racists will feel few constraints on their rhetoric and actions. Frederika Randall quotes an example of the Lega Nord's "racist, xenophobic rhetoric from Radio Padania Libera: 'It's easier to exterminate rats than eliminate the gypsies.'"

Women's rights and the movement for gender equality are unlikely to advance under the new government. Rightist forces have been attempting to weaken Italy's abortion law and those efforts are sure to continue, even accelerate. Sexual violence and workplace harassment are all too common in Italy. But one doubts that Berlusconi, notorious for his sexist pronouncements, will oppose these ills with the same fervor he's brought to his crusade against "communist" magistrates. Legal bans on stem cell research and fertility treatments that the outgoing government failed to reverse will remain in place.

The situation of sexual minorities also will worsen. Not only will any attempts to secure legal

protections for homosexuals be stymied; gay people may even find their physical safety, their very existence, at risk. Gay-bashings, not uncommon in Italy, are likely to increase, especially in Rome. There voters have elected as mayor Gianni Alemanno of the Alleanza Nazionale, the far-right party whose leader Gianfranco Fini once proposed that gay and lesbian teachers be fired from their jobs.

Fini, by the way, is now the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of parliament.

Even before the elections, gays, lesbians, and transgenders faced a hostile and intimidating atmosphere in Rome. In February, the Coming Out Café, a gay venue near the Coliseum that I've visited with friends, was firebombed. The perpetrators have yet to be identified or arrested.

Fascists Unbound

Rome's rightists, flushed with victory, now feel totally unrestrained. After Alemanno's election was announced, a bunch of them gathered at the Campidoglio, where they gave the Fascist roman salute and chanted, "Duce! Duce!"

Their leader Fini, who once called Mussolini "the greatest statesman of the 20th century," now claims to head a post-Fascist, non-racist, "modern" right-wing party. But the Alleanza Nazionale rank and file, including the braying imbeciles thrusting their arms skyward in the Fascist salute, pays no mind to their leader's PR gestures. They believe the Mussolini years were glorious and they are passionate supporters of Fascism's violent, racist, and misogynistic ideology. It may not be the 1920s all over again, but it's certainly, chillingly close enough.

As The Independent of London noted in an editorial, "Mr. Alemanno's victory is another boost for Mr. Berlusconi, but a bitter blow to anyone who dared to hope that Italy had buried its far-right demons."

A few commentators have tried to downplay the awfulness of the election results. British author Tobias Jones, for example, admitted that the sight of roman salutes at the Campidoglio was a bit disconcerting. But, he assured us, this is all just the "teatrino" of Italian politics, nothing to get too worked up about. Well, I wouldn't condescend to Italy's rightists like that, or trivialize their agenda. I also suspect that those Italians most likely to suffer from Italy's drastic right turn will not be consoled by Jones.

Right before the elections, Italy lost a soccer match to Spain. That indignity was compounded by the news that Spain's economy outperforms that of Italy. Spain, once the most reactionary nation in Western Europe, is now the most progressive, with a socialist government, legal protections for gay people, including the right to marry, and a majority-female cabinet. Berlusconi, ever the neanderthal, remarked that President Zapatero's cabinet was "too pink," i.e., too many women.

Spain, having shrugged off the vestiges of its fascist past, looks to the future. Italy appears to be marching in the opposite direction, its fist raised in a salute to its darkest days.

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