
Berlusconi's improbable coalition

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Berlusconi's improbable coalition

Paolo Tripodi backgrounds the political transformation which has occurred in Italy and the parties that formed the coalition backing the short-lived government of Silvio Berlusconi during 1994.

The March 1994 elections in Italy transformed the political scene. After forty years, a revolution has occurred. Italy has been atypical in Western Europe in that it has not experienced a normal alternation in power. Since the end of the Second World War, moderate left or moderate right governments have held power in France, Germany and the United Kingdom, Gaullists and Socialists in France, CDU and SPD in Germany, Conservatives and Labour in the United Kingdom. In Italy, by contrast, the Christian Democrats remained in office throughout.

After the elections, the government comprised three new parties. Forza Italia, the most recently created, was formed four months before the elections by Silvio Berlusconi. The Northern League represents the expression of strong federalism that at the same time is quite separatist. Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) is the new label of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), the neo-fascist movement — or post-fascist, as its secretary, Gianfranco Fini, describes it. This was the oldest party in the coalition.

The government appeared to be unstable, because of the very different characteristics among the three coalition partners. Furthermore, the process that allowed this grouping to hold power was quite strange. Political scientists and commentators emphasised that this transformation had been made possible by a fortunate turn of events. There was, first, the change in the electoral law from a proportional to a majority system, and second, 'Mani Pulite', a judicial operation inaugurated by the Milan magistrates against political corruption. Directly as a consequence of these events, the Italian population lost confidence in the former parties of government.

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Republican constitution

The origins of Italian democracy lie in the constitution promulgated after the collapse of fascism at the end of Second World War. The republican constitution was the outcome of a particular historical situation, in which all political formations were allied against fascism. These events represented Italy's first steps towards a true democratic system. The first government coalition was established by the party members of the CLN (National Liberation Committee). The government of 'national unity' comprised Christian Democrats, Socialists and Communists.

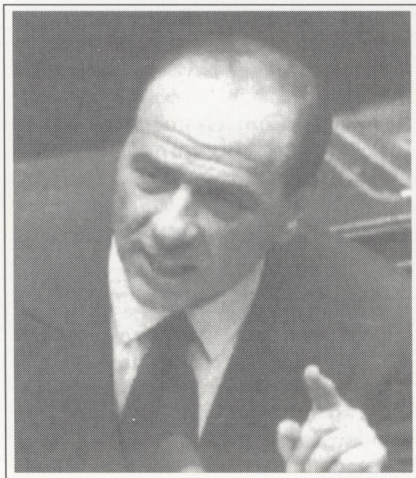
By 1947 the Christian Democrats had decided to run the country by themselves. After the 18 April 1948 general election, in which they obtained 48.5 per cent of votes, the antagonism between Catholics and Communists became particularly strong. From then until March 1994, the Christian Democrats held power. In 1964 they decided to enlarge the government coalition by admitting the Socialist Party, which had previously backed them.

In running the country for almost 50 years, the Christian Democrats' power increased day by day, bolstered by a broad system of alliance. Furthermore, there was a widespread network of favouritism and political corruption. From the 1960s, government parties infiltrated every sector of the state. Bureaucracy, administration, economy and more recently the mass media have become tools in the parties' hands.

Static situation

The political situation remained static. The Italian scene was characterised by the continuation of leadership by the same group of politicians. The biggest opposition parties never obtained enough electoral support to replace the Christian Democrats as the party of power. The Communist Party, the strongest opposition party, obtained its best electoral result (34.4 per cent) in the general election of 1976 — a great success, yet not enough to overthrow the Christian Democrats.

In this situation of consolidated Christian Democrat and Socialist power, it was difficult to overthrow the 'penta partito'



Silvio Berlusconi

(the five-party coalition government). Yet, in the few years since the end of 1992, the political scene has become surprisingly volatile. The majority of Italian political scientists agree that two events were significant in this change: the judicial operation that the magistrates of Milan started in 1992 to stop political corruption (*Mani Pulite*) and the new electoral law adopted in 1993.

Political earthquake

Mani Pulite began in February 1992. At that time it was impossible to imagine the earthquake that would overthrow those in power. Since then there have been hundreds of arrests of politicians, bureaucrats, and company and state managers. According to Franco Bechis, in *Onorevole l'arresto!*,¹ up to December last year, 447 MPs had been charged with corruption, extortion or contacts with the Mafia. Among them are MPs (such Andreotti and Craxi) that held influential positions in the government. 'There has been a strict connection between the end of the first republic and the operation of *Mani Pulite*', Professor Santoro claimed at a conference at the Italian Cultural Institute in London. Another political scientist, Professor Ginsborg, considered that 'The magistrates didn't go beyond their powers, they played an important role in restoring a democratic system.' Nevertheless, in Italy at the moment there is a strong debate over whether the magistrates should have the power so significantly to influence political life. Antonio di Pietro, the most famous Italian public prosecutor, now a kind of national hero, insists that the magistrates have merely applied the law. 'I am a public prosecutor, . . . the politician will make the law and I will apply it'.

In April 1993, a general referendum abrogated the proportional electoral law. Giovanni Sartori, in *Seconda Repubblica?*

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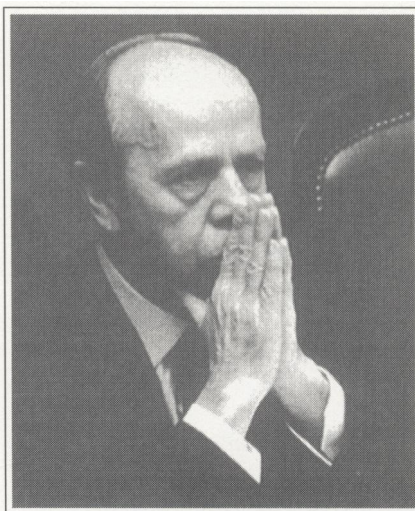
Si, ma bene, expressed the idea of reforming the political system, beginning with a new electoral law.² Sergio Mattarella of the Christian Democrats formulated the new electoral law that was approved by the Parliament on 8 August 1993. The electoral reform was based on the majority system, with only 25 per cent of MPs elected through the proportional system. This law was, and still is, criticised because it did not create a solid majority in the Parliament. The most visible consequence of the new electoral law after the general election in March 1994 was the poor result achieved by the political alliance of the centre. Professor Bobbio, in an interview for *il Corriere della Sera*, said: 'As a consequence of the elections there has been a positive result; this is the unblocking of democracy. Now there is a bipolarity with a small centre, nothing like the old Christian Democrats. Alternation is now possible such as in the mature democracies'.

Parliamentary composition

After the elections the political centre in Italy was left with 46 MPs in the Chamber of Deputies and 31 senators in the Chamber of Senators. The progressivist coalition, which comprised all the left-wing political parties, gained 213 MPs and 122 senators. The winner of the general election was the 'Polo delle Libertà'. The right-wing coalition obtained 366 MPs (an absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies) and 155 senators (a relative majority in the Chamber of Senators, where the absolute majority is reached with 158 senators).

Although before the elections many political scientists predicted a good result for the right-wing coalition, nobody expected a total victory for Berlusconi's coalition. Forza Italia represents one of the strangest political phenomena in Italian history. The party was created only four months before the elections. It did not have a detailed political programme, though it did have a precise aim: to create a coalition to oppose the likely victory of the left-wing coalition. Furthermore, Berlusconi, the founder of the party, did not have a political background or political experience.

There are many different aspects of these events that deserve special attention: the need for Italian public opinion to have a '*Uomo nuovo*', a new man; the influence on political life and on the electorate's decision of Berlusconi's mass media; the coalition with the federalist movement and the former extreme-right party. Nevertheless, some features are discernible. First, there is the complete identification of Berlusconi with the movement. Forza Italia exists because of Berlusconi and the image of the political formation is strictly tied to its leader. Second, Berlusconi and Forza Italia were suc-



Lamberto Dini, who replaced Berlusconi as prime minister in January 1995

cessful in inserting in the party programme the most pressing demands of the Italian population. Professor Ginsborg has defined Forza Italia as an empty box. The party programme was like a mirror reflecting the electorate's desires: simplified and reduced taxation, greater efficiency in the administration, more respect for family values, more jobs. Commentator Dr Leonardi, on the other hand, raised doubts about the existence of a programme at all, and of a serious will to break with the former system of running the country on the basis of corruption and extortion.

Strong aversion

The other new party in the government coalition was the Northern League. At the core of its programme lies a strong aversion to the centralisation of power in Rome, the power of government parties, the central bureaucracy and the internal revenue. These factors played a decisive role in the success of the Northern League in the March 1994 general election. The electoral base of the Northern League is located, as its name suggests, in Northern Italy. Furthermore, at the time of the election the federal aspirations of the Northern League did not as yet have clear identity. The success of the League was more the result of its tough opposition against the old government coalition and party system than its federalist project.

After the general election, a Northern League assembly in Assago approved a 'federal constitution'. According to this proposal, Italy would become a federal union formed by three republics: the Northern Republic, the Etruria Republic and the Southern Republic. The Parliament would be transformed into a Diet, the prime minister would be elected directly by the electorate, and the central government would have responsibility for foreign policy, the economy, justice and defence. All the other administrative functions would be delegated to the republics.

For the first time in Assago the idea of federalism, as the basis of the Northern League's political programme, was revealed in clear terms. Leopoldo Elia, former minister for the institutional reforms, commenting on the federalist programme, said:

Strong regional powers just cannot be invented. They are the outcome of a historical process. While in Italy there is a historical context unfavourable to these powers, in Germany there is a continuity among great regional administrations which are useful tools to balance the central power.

Main component

Federalism has been the main component in the Northern League programme. Although at the inception of the movement this was quite unclear, it has gradually become increasingly important. For this reason, and because of its strong support in Northern Italy, the League is allied with Forza Italia in the Northern Italian regions. But its stance has been somewhat ambivalent. Even after the electoral victory of the Polo delle Libertà, its leader, Bossi, declared: 'I must think very very carefully before I decide to join a government with this anti-federalist right wing party (National Alliance), with the first impulse to send the people to the gallows'.

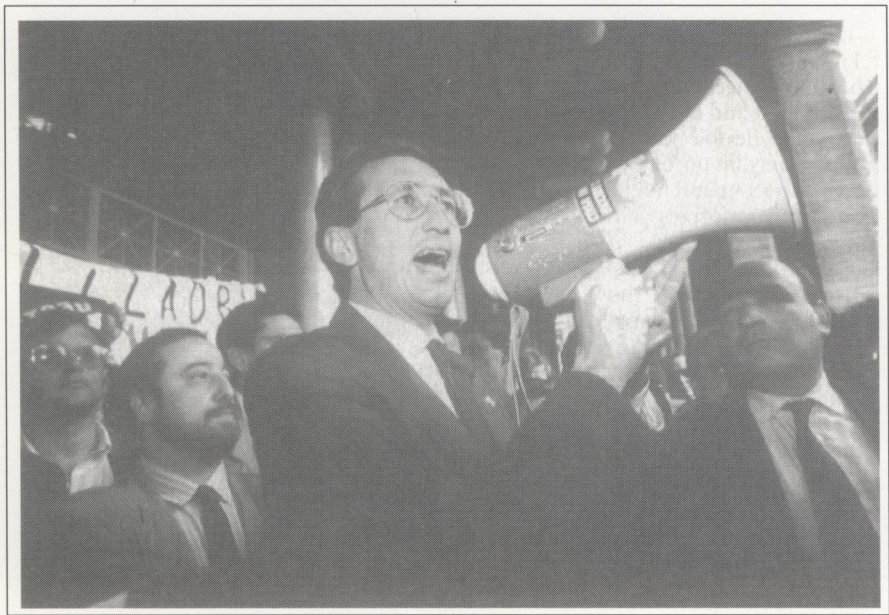
The National Alliance, the other element in Berlusconi's coalition, is itself a coalition of right-wing formations (among them is a small group of former Christian Democrats) characterised by the overwhelming presence of the MSI, the Italian Social Movement. The secretary of the MSI, Gianfranco Fini, leads the National Alliance.

Since the 1948 election, the electoral base of the MSI has been located in Southern Italy. This area of the country was not seriously touched by the civil war and it is traditionally conservative. At the beginning of the 1970s, Pino Rauti formed inside the MSI a political faction to overcome the ties the MSI had with the past. The new political antagonist was, not the communists, but the régime created by the Christian Democrats. This activity, commentator Piero Ignazi maintains, 'represents a true ideological and cultural innovation for the MSI'.

First sign

After a long period of isolation, the first sign that there was a new political opportunity for the MSI came with the administrative elections in some Italian cities. Rome and Naples were the most significant. In the electoral ballot for Mayor of Rome in November 1993, Fini obtained 46.9 per cent of electoral preferences. Alessandra Mussolini, Benito Mussolini's granddaughter, obtained more than 40 per cent in Naples. These two results were

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Gianfranco Fini, leader of the National Alliance

evidence of the electability of the MSI. In this context, the MSI, mainly under the pressure of its secretary, started a process of deep internal political revision. Before and after the election, particularly as a consequence of the positive results achieved, Gianfranco Fini has been committed to change the national and international image of the party. In the many interviews he gave, Fini characterised the party as conservative rather than extreme. He described the National Alliance as post-fascist, a definition which has more an historical than a political meaning. In an interview with the author, Fortunato Aloï, MP for the National Alliance and former under-secretary of the Ministry of Public Education, emphasised that fascism and anti-fascism belong to history. Post-fascism is a historical period following the fall of fascism. During this period all political movements which take place may aspire to liberal democratic ideals, or socialist ideals, and so on. So, neo-fascism is a political phenomenon while post-fascism is a historical phenomenon.

Political revision

During the forty years of MSI's existence, there has been a process of political revision. Entrenched conflicts between left and right have softened, and in the 1980s the party has been accepted on the political scene, emerging from the ghetto where it had been confined since 1946. The MSI never adopted a policy explicitly hostile towards immigrants. In 1990, in the brief period during which Pino Rauti was secretary of the party, he introduced new elements in MSI policy: tolerance and the right to dissent. When he replaced Rauti as leader in 1991, Fini did not change the party's anti-xenophobic and tolerant political stance.

However, after such a short period of time it is impossible to test whether or not the process of revision has been effective or whether it has been determined by political opportunism. In the Italian political scene, for more than forty years, the MSI represented the link with fascist ideology. Through the MSI and men like Almirante, Romualdi and Pisano, the political idea of the RSI (the Italian Social Republic created by Mussolini towards the end of the Second World War) survived the civil war and the adoption of an anti-fascist constitution. Yet on 28 January 1994, at the congress of the MSI, Fini firmly rejected all forms of dictatorship,

totalitarianism, racism and discrimination. At the end of October, Fini expressed his intention to change the main pillars of the movement, transforming it into a political formation belonging to the conservative right. He wants the party to adopt a political line markedly distinct from its past fascist inheritance.

End point

The first congress of the National Alliance in January 1995, with the passage of the old MSI, cannot be considered as an end point. The substitution of old icons with new ones, accompanied by the creation of a new image, do not necessarily signify the replacement of an extremist ideology with a moderate one. The congress can be viewed as a starting point in testing the capability of the National Alliance's change and renewal. Only the future will tell whether the MSI's political revision is a quick and false electoral operation or the first step towards a full democratic integration.

Piero Ignazi, for one, is not convinced that the transformation is other than political opportunism. In an interview after the election, he described 'post-fascismo' as merely a clever strategy adopted by Gianfranco Fini. According to Ignazi, even the formation of the National Alliance, used by Fini like a new party, is just an optical illusion for ideological change that has not been realised at all up to now.

NOTES

- 1. F. Bechis, *Onorevole l'arresto!*, Rome, 1994.
- 2. G. Sartori, *Seconda Repubblica? Sì, ma bene*, Milan, 1993, pp.7-8.

Silvio Berlusconi's government collapsed after the Northern League tabled a motion of no-confidence in it in Parliament. Berlusconi resigned on 22 December 1994, and was replaced by Lamberto Dini, who formed a caretaker government of technocrats.

NZIIA MEDIA PRIZE

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