

Italy: From Berlusconi To A European Spring?

Written by Giuseppe Lenzo

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GIUSEPPE LENZO, JUL 4 2011

Many agree on the fact that Italy needs reform: Berlusconi's republic has lasted for too long and Italians' hopes for change have been severely hampered. It is desolately striking to notice that, one of the alleged richest countries in the world, as well as a G8 member, presents low productivity, high public debt (around 119% of GDP – World Bank) and tremendously worrisome rates of unemployment in the South (14% – OECD), especially for young people. Notably, when it comes to see who the unemployed are, the sad news is that more than one of every four youngsters are jobless, the sixth worst situation in Europe. Also, the Italian government was recently incapable of handling the unpredicted arrival of around twenty thousand people from the Northern African shores, and solicited the European Union to assist, as well as destabilized its diplomatic relations with France as many migrants sought to flee towards the Italian North-Western border at Ventimiglia. Thus, this picture suggests that, despite a still productive economy relying mostly on family-owned business – the heart of Italian fortunes – the *Belpaese* is an economically and politically fragile country unable to deal with the internal and external challenges of the twenty-first century.

Politics is paralysed in two main camps: Berlusconi's power in opposition to the others. His People of Freedom Party (PdL) in fact, along with the xenophobe, far-right Northern League, has no credible rivals in the Left, as the centre-left Democratic Party alone cannot guarantee a strong and stable majority to run the country. However, Berlusconi's recent defeat in administrative elections, especially in crucial cities such as Naples and Milan, his stronghold and city where he was born, may lead some to think that something is shifting and that this can perhaps be a turning point.

Nonetheless, Italian people do not trust the Leftists either, as when they were in office from 2006 to 2008, under the former President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, they proved unable to tackle the fundamental issues Italians demanded. They ended up by disaggregating after only two years, given the deep fragmentation affecting that coalition, whose ideology ranged from extreme Marxist-Leninist advocates to socialists and Christian Democrats, among the others.

The anomaly of the Italian system, unlike other Western democracies affected by political-economic troubles, is the well-known conflict of interests, as Silvio Berlusconi – the richest man in the country and one of the wealthiest tycoons in the world – is the owner of the country's largest television broadcaster (Mediaset), as well as he controls indirectly the State-owned tv company, RAI, which along with Mediaset constitute a *de facto* duopoly in the television market. Needless to say that Berlusconi's media empire exerts a strong grip on information, playing a crucial role in persuading especially old people who are not likely to obtain information online. There seems to be no way out from this alarming deadlock: no single party, from the Left or the Right, since the start of Berlusconi's political enterprise (1994) has been able to address such a vital concern for a fully-fledged democracy. Moreover, since the 1992 'Mani pulite' (Clean hands) scandal, many Italians started showing a universal disaffection for politics and politicians, whose general reputation has not improved since then, not to mention Berlusconi's trials and prosecutions for bribery, corruption and allegations of having had sex with underage prostitutes.

A poor performance by Berlusconi's governments, running the country for most of the last seventeen years, and a too accommodating Left led to disappointment and despair among the people, as both sides of the political spectrum were ineffective in driving economic reforms, by also implementing unwise public spending. Innovative forms of gathering and representation are needed, and the role of social networks and online communication may lead to a new, more participated democracy from below.

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To this respect last 12 and 13 of June Italians showed that there is little chance to make a change, as they massively voted for a referendum abolishing the creation of nuclear plants, the privatisation of water services and the so-called 'legitimate impediment' which would have let the Prime Minister find a motive not to appear in a criminal court. The surprisingly encouraging aspect is that, even though the mainstream information had not provide an appropriate coverage of the referendum vote, a high turnout and a cross-party participation gave the referendum outcome the legitimacy to be a strong message not only against who runs the country but also for those who are supposed to oppose but who do not.

One wonders whether the Arab spring coming North from the Mediterranean may bring the winds of change and jasmine that Italy, as well as other troubled countries in Southern Europe need. Demonstrations in Spain (the so-called *indignados* protested in Madrid and Barcelona) and Syntagma Square in Greece represent a wish for change demanded by the other side of the Mediterranean, and are matched in Italy by citizens such as the comedian Beppe Grillo – whose blog is the ninth most visited in the world – and his '5-star movement', a web network aiming at renovating politics and fighting corruption. It is beyond question that if people lack engagement in politics, consequences may be detrimental, thus everyone should get involved in such epochal events taking place in and around the Old Continent. Spreading protests and massive rallies are symptoms of renewed feelings beyond the traditional categorisations and the ideological liberal-left/conservative-right divide. After Tahir Square and the turmoil in all Maghreb and the Middle East, it is probably time for a European spring, and Italy may have the potential to take the lead of this awakening.

Giuseppe Lenzo is a MA student at the School of Government and International Affairs at the University of Durham. He studies the International Relations of Europe. He earned a BA degree in Linguistics at the University of Catania (Italy) and is involved in the Erasmus Socrates Programme at the University of the Basque Country (Spain). He has published several commentaries for university papers, online magazines and blogs in Italy and the UK.