

Blasting Off the Nuclear Referendum (and Others)

Judith Harris (April 25, 2011)



What the moratorium on the construction of nuclear power plants really stands for

ROME - Last week the Italian government headed by Silvio Berlusconi managed to quash a referendum, slated to take place June 12, that imposes a year-long moratorium on planned construction of nuclear power plants. But what sounds like a positive step—the moratorium—was in effect a cunning act of sleight of hand.

First, if the anti-nuclear referendum were to pass, as was probable, it would have been a slap in the face of the government while slamming the door to construction of nuclear power plants for at least a generation. Ironically this maneuver seems to contradict a government decree of 2008 calling for construction of nuclear plants, later converted into law. But in fact the moratorium was a holding action intended to gain time until public fears, fanned by the reactor disaster in Japan, subside.

The blocking action paves the way for canceling the vote on two other referenda slated for that same day. Both challenge policies dear to Berlusconi and his allies: voting for or against the commercial



privatization of water and, of vital importance to Berlusconi personally, for or against a law known here as “legitimate impediment,” which allows high-level politicians to beg off being tried for alleged misdeeds on grounds they are too busy with matters of state. In other words, passage in the Senate last week of the amendment to a government decree imposing a nuclear moratorium threatens the other two.

Despite [Fukushima](#) [2], Berlusconi, backed by the [Confindustria](#) [3] (Italy’s National Association of Manufacturers) remains enthusiastically pro-nuclear, as he confided to a group of 24 foreign journalists attending a four-hour supper with him two weeks ago. What he is lobbying for is construction, at a cost estimated at \$60 billion, of advanced-generation EPR reactors with a 60-year shelf life for to be built together with the French nuclear agency. Jobs for up to 6,000 Italian workers are promised.

But the Italian public has long been hostile to nuclear power, and the ongoing disaster in Japan has done little to change their minds. The planned referendum against it therefore showed every sign of being passed and once again blocking construction of nuclear plants for decades. The arguments against it are well known: Italy is one big earthquake fault-line, and has suffered serious quake from Friuli in the Alps down through the Abruzzi, the Irpinia valley, Assisi and Sicily. Tuscania in the Lazio Region and even Rome itself suffered quake damage at the Campidoglio, repaired—again with a touch of irony—by the Japanese. An obvious further problem is that the entire Italian territory husbands a uniquely rich artistic and archaeological heritage which any nuclear accident could destroy.

Referendum voting was first possible in Italy in 1972, and at that time efforts began to put nuclear power onto the public agenda. Nevertheless, that became possible only in 1987 in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster. That vote successfully imposed a total block on construction of nuclear power plants for nearly a quarter of a century, leaving Italy the sole non-nuclear country among the Group of Eight industrialized nations. As a result, Italy must therefore purchase almost all of its power from abroad, including electric power generated in nuclear facilities in neighboring France, while Russia and, at least until now, Libya supply the bulk of Italian purchases of petroleum and natural gas.

In case anyone missed the point, the reasoning behind the moratorium was spelled out by Emma Marcegaglia, the pro-nuclear head of the Confindustria; that public opinion polls were showing that an “emotional” response to Fukushima was propelling referendum voters to vote anti-nuclear. At stake moreover is the water referendum, which—if trounced—would cost the manufacturers something in the neighborhood of \$80 billion over the next three decades. If privatization of supplying water to homes and factories and farms is permitted, capital investments by water suppliers would be repaid by the government, which is to say by tax payers. The prospects are alluring enough that Italian business page headlines speak of water as “blue gold.”

As for the third referendum the government is intent upon sinking, any overturning of the “legitimate impediment” bill would be an obstacle on the road to elections for president of Italy, scheduled for 2013, when Giorgio Napolitano must retire.

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