

Referendum in Italy: The Government Defeated. And Now What?

Judith Harris (June 14, 2011)



**Referendum del 12 e 13 Giugno.
Vieni. A votare.**

4 Sì per l'acqua pubblica, per lo stop al nucleare, per la legge uguale per tutti.

Over half the country is rejoicing this week because a nationwide referendum drew a stunning turnout of over 57% of those eligible to vote, and four pieces of center-right legislation dear to Premier Silvio Berlusconi were overturned. The referendum result made three essential points: first, that democracy is alive and well in Italy; secondly, that the media do not tell the whole story; and, thirdly, that it is time for the nation's leaders to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

ROME - No one expected it, no one predicted it. Most feared that the government's media barrage would prevail, many feared that the judicial muddle over the flawed writing of the abrogative texts given to the 3 million voters outside Italy would queer the whole story. Never mind—despite all this,



well over half the country is rejoicing this week because a nationwide referendum drew a stunning turnout of over 57% of those eligible to vote. Four pieces of center-right legislation dear to Premier Silvio Berlusconi's heart and his cronies' pocketbooks were overturned as a result of this healthy quorum: construction of nuclear power plants, the privatization of water (two bills) and a dodgem law giving Berlusconi personal immunity from prosecution while in office.

The vote shows a healthy change in political mood—a delayed reaction especially from young voters alienated less by the Premier's personal life style than by the government's lack of reaction to, and concern over, their problems of education and their meager job prospects. In a country where 30% of college graduates are jobless, this new generation twittered each other all the way to the polls. This was a protest vote, and it was a youth vote, but not only. In some regions of North and Central Italy the turnout was staggering, with over 60% voting in the Val d'Aosta, Tuscany, the Marches, Reggio Emilia and the Trentino-Alto Adige. Calabria had the lowest turnout, but even so a majority of 50.3% participated. Most importantly, each of the four votes in favor of abrogation was a massive success ("a Bulgarian vote," some are joking), from the 94.75% who voted down nuclear power plants to the 95.15% voting against "legitimate impediment" (the political dodgem law).

Berlusconi went out defiantly shopping for costume jewelry just when the results were being announced Monday. Later he casually allowed that he may be a bit of sync with some Italians, and to the visiting Israeli delegation he remarked that all over Europe there are indications of a mood swing, making Italy in line with the rest of the crowd. He himself is already on record saying beforehand that the vote holds no consequence for the government.

Whatever he says, he has good reason to be concerned over his Northern League partners, who blame him for the shellacking. The League's ranking government figure, Interior Minister Roberto Maroni, called the referendum "the second body blow" to the government, the first being the left-leaning election sweep of two weeks ago, which lost the governing coalition important cities like Naples and Milan. Berlusconi is hounded furthermore by his League-leaning budget minister, the economist Giulio Tremonti, and behind the scenes their respective aparaticni are hurling nasty insults at each other on the lines of "He thinks he can be premier or even president" and "He has people spying on me." True or false, Berlusconi is thus under attack from within the government and without, and is also known to fear that the double-whammy results from the voters in these two extraordinary weeks have moreover given aid and comfort to the magistrates already hounding him.

For the League, this is a festering situation. Its leaders know that countless of their supporters defied the party's orders to stay at home and instead voted in the referendum, contributing to the successful achievement of a quorum. Some analysts here believe that the leadership of Umberto Bossi himself is being challenged. His response to this newly volatile situation is expected to come Sunday, when he will address his followers at the party's annual rally at Pontida. The League considers tiny Pontida (pop. 3,200), near Bergamo, its symbolic fiefdom and capital because in 1167 a group of Lombard communes formed a League and in a field at Pontida solemnly swore an oath to fight against the despised German emperor Barbarossa. The Padania email inbox is cluttered with protests from the League's rank and file that Berlusconi is dragging down the party they once loved. Bossi therefore is expected to issue a threat at Pontida June 21: either enact federalism as law or hold new elections, perhaps as soon as October.

In Sicily, meanwhile, where run-off elections were held in a handful of small towns on Sunday and Monday, there too voters mustered out the old to bring in the new. Curiously, however, few on the left are calling for the government to be dispatched on the spot, and political commentator Beppe Servergnini, for one, said he does not expect the government to collapse or for Berlusconi to be sent home in the immediate future.

So now what? At this point, governing bodies should step in, just when the 2008 economic recession is being belatedly felt throughout Italy. Those factories doing well are exporting to Germany, and until now the recession has been papered over as if by magic. Suddenly reports are coming in that banks are seizing homes whose owners fail to make mortgage payments. Savings, which used to be a mainstay for the Italian family, are down to zero, as last week's central bank report showed, and consumer purchases are still low. It is obvious that under these circumstances the Italian government will have to move quickly to resolve the problems which, they had hoped, could be



handled by privatization, beginning with the search for new energy sources.

The strongest vote, 96.2%, vetoed privatization of water power for profit. This veto leaves the government to take action, all the more urgent since 80% of Italian water usage is for the money-earners: industry and agriculture; only one-fifth is for private use. The problem is lack of maintenance. In the U.S. a loss of 10% from leaking pipelines is considered more or less the norm, but hydrologists say that 30% is lost in Italy. If the loss comes inland, the water seeps down into the water table and then returns, but if the pipeline leaks near the sea, the water goes into salt water and is not returned to the water circuit until evaporated into clouds and then rain. The biggest loss comes with the 1,360-mile-long Puglie aqueduct, with 10,000 miles of conduits, whose construction began in 1906 and was completed just before WWII, in time for war damage. This agricultural region is particularly dry, but the aqueduct "loses 50.3% of the water it carries," according to a report from Reuters news agency in 2008. "Overall Italy wastes 14% more water than France, 36% more than Spain, 56% more than Britain and 311% more than Germany."

The referendum result makes therefore three essential points: first, that democracy is alive and well in Italy; secondly, that the media do not tell the whole story; and, thirdly, that it is time for the nation's leaders to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

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