

Rome Turns Right

Judith Harris (April 30, 2008)



Berlusconi chalks up his second victory this month. “We’ll be licking these wounds for as long as we have tongues, and maybe longer,” was the mournful comment of Alessandro Robecchi, in the left-wing newspaper *Il Manifesto*.

ROME – Last Sunday and Monday 5.8 million Italians were asked to return to the polls for a second time this month for a run-off among candidates for mayor and administrators in 44 townships and



five provinces. Rome was the toughest battleground, where the vote was being viewed as a litmus test of the relative strengths of the two main parties that slogged it out at the polls two weeks ago, Silvio Berlusconi's victorious Popolo della Libertà, or People's Liberty party (PDL), and Walter Veltroni's moderately progressive Democratic party (PD). And in the end, Berlusconi's candidate won, by 53.7% to 46.3%.

For the past fifteen years Rome has had a center-left government, headed alternately by Francesco Rutelli and Veltroni himself. Especially during the past three years the citizens' tolerance has been sorely tried by Rom squatter camps, slow and jam-packed public transport, filthy and dangerous commuter train stations, immigrant hawkers and beggars blocking sidewalks, graffiti-sprayed buildings, drunken violence in the downtown historic center by night, and garbage-strewing hordes of tourists by day. Streets in the center are still hand swept daily; shopkeepers literally scrub sidewalks, and cleanup crews wash building walls, but old hands revisiting Rome are shocked at the sheer extent of *il degrado*, the degradation of this unique and uniquely beautiful city with its heritage of history, religion and art.

In addition, in past weeks an unaccustomed crescendo of violence attributed to untrammelled immigration—rapes, murders, drunk drivers who kill children and the elderly—has given the Rome campaign a raw edge, heightened by the success of the anti-immigrant Northern League two weeks ago.

With this as the background, the PD candidate was the acting Culture Minister (and former mayor) Rutelli, who faced off against Gianni Alemanno, representing the Berlusconi alliance. Two weeks ago Rutelli won almost 46% of the vote in Rome as compared with Alemanno's under 41%, but the positions were reversed when all the votes were counted in the runoff in what was considered an upset victory for the right.

The Rome result was also a personal victory for Gianfranco Fini, the former neo-fascist youth leader and head of the modernized "post-fascist" former Alleanza Nazionale (now merged with Berlusconi's PDL), who had turned out personally to campaign for Alemanno.

Challenging immigrant hawkers in one of Rome's outdoor markets this week, Fini asked to see their work permits. When those he questioned proved to have their papers in order, and chummily photographed him with their cell phones, Fini grumbled, "They probably bought their papers."

Fini himself has been a nudging hawker. On April 14-15 Umberto Bossi's Northern League walked off with 8.4% of the vote and hence has more clout with Berlusconi than does Fini himself. Alemanno's victory in Rome bolsters the otherwise overshadowed Fini.

Bossi and Fini represent diametrically opposed constituencies. Bossi is usually described simplistically as "anti-immigrant," but today his party has moved from its early rustic populism toward a more sophisticated brand of federalism, especially fiscal federalism, code words for keeping tax money in the regions where levied. If enacted, public funds would less likely flow from the full-employment North down to the troubled Italian South—but that South, and especially the Campania Region around Naples and the Puglie on the Eastern Coast of the peninsula, is just where Fini's movement is strongest, and also where Fini also risks challenge by the vestiges of the far right associated with the otherwise lame group around Alessandra Mussolini, granddaughter of the Duce.

Meanwhile, the right's victory in Rome has some quite fearful. Last night as we walked by the Capitoline Hill, where the mayor has offices and the city council meets, supporters of the Alleanza Nazionale faction of Berlusconi's outfit were feting their victory. Among them was a group of young



thuggish far rightists raising arms in Fascist-style salutes and yelling, "Duce, Duce!" as the middle-class Berlusconi backers hushed them and said, "One mustn't do that, the TV cameras are watching." The mood among the losers here is apprehensive. There is also fear in the gay community that there will be bashings to come, fear among the law-abiding immigrants of a harsh clamp-down, and fear in the Jewish community that the Nazi deportation of a thousand Romans will be forgotten or worse. Sign of the new times: on Sunday night a plaque to Auschwitz victims was hacked out of a wall in an Eastern Rome suburb.

This article is an abridged version of a longer piece that appeared on [DIRELAND](#) [2]

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