

Referendums on autonomy take place in northern Italy

By Marianne Arens
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Referendums promoted by the separatist Lega Nord (Northern League) were held Sunday in the northern Italian regions of Lombardy and Veneto. Citizens were being asked to back granting their regional presidents the authority to initiate negotiations with Italy's central government in Rome on autonomy.

In both regions, which are among the wealthiest in Italy, members of the right-wing Lega Nord serve as president: in Lombardy, Roberto Maroni, and in Veneto, Luca Zaia. The Lega Nord is promising voters that within the framework of greater autonomy, it will be able to exert control over tax revenue and not have to transfer it all to the central government, "Roma ladrona" (Rome, the thieves).

Late Sunday, both Maroni and Zaia claimed victory, with more than 90 percent backing autonomy in both regions, according to preliminary results. Maroni said the outcome meant both regions could unite their forces for "the battle of the century."

Autonomy is being sought in 23 spheres in which the regions would control their own affairs. These include the areas of internal security and immigration, research and science, education, environmental policy, and—most importantly—tax revenues and economic relations with the world market. Maroni told the *Financial Times*, "If I only had half of the taxes we send to the south, I could solve all of Lombardy's problems."

With an eye on the bitter Catalanian conflict in neighbouring Spain, commentators are attempting to deceive the European and Italian public. The issue in Italy is by no means a separation of the regions from the central state, they claim, but is purely a consultative referendum that is non-binding and, moreover, in conformity with the constitution.

Nonetheless, the outcome of the referendums will have serious implications, both for Italy and Europe as a whole. The Lega Nord is attempting to mobilise petty bourgeois sections of the population, who are suffering in the crisis, behind the policy of a regional carve-up and ultimately a sharp shift to the right in Italy. Maroni, who served as a minister in Silvio Berlusconi's government on several occasions in Rome, noted in an interview with the *New York Times*, "The more people vote, the greater bargaining power I will have."

The Lega Nord, under leader Matteo Salvini, has developed over the past four years from a regional into a national party. The party gave up its original demand of a separation of the Padua region from Italy. Instead, it pursues an anti-European Union (EU), right-wing extremist and racist programme along the lines of Marine Le Pen's National Front in France. This continued to be the case, even after Salvini claimed following Le Pen's defeat in the French presidential election, "We are not Le Penisti."

Salvini is hoping for a victory in the upcoming parliamentary election, which must take place by May 2018. He is prepared to make a series of concessions to this end. In last June's municipal elections, the Lega Nord formed a coalition with former prime minister and multi-billionaire Berlusconi and neo-fascist Georgia Meloni from Fratelli d'Italia. In this way, the party managed to benefit most from the collapse of the social democratic Democratic Party (PD).

However, Fratelli d'Italia advocates a strong, authoritarian centralised state. They were the only party to oppose the referendums in Lombardy and Veneto. The votes were an "insult to the fatherland," according to Meloni.

Taking account of this, Salvini put the regional campaign for the referendums on the back burner. This became clear when the right-wing separatist "South Tyrol Freedom" celebrated the outcome of the October 1 referendum in Catalonia with a demonstration on the Brenner Pass highway (between Italy and Austria) and promoted the slogan, "Today Catalonia—Tomorrow South Tyrol." The Lega Nord effectively played no role in the rally. The long-term goal of entering the government in Rome was more important.

New election law "Rosatellum 2.0"

The new election law, passed by the chamber of deputies October 12 and referred to as "Rosatellum 2.0" (after the PD parliamentary leader Ettore Rosato), comes at just the right time for Salvini's hopes of power. The law still has to be adopted by the Senate and signed by President Sergio Mattarella. Since the failure of former prime minister Matteo Renzi's constitutional reform on December 4, 2016, Italy has not had a valid election law.

The law combines elements of first-past-the-post and

proportional systems and explicitly permits the combining of party lists. It contains a 3 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation, which increases to 10 percent for party list coalitions, although the hurdle for each party in such an alliance will only be 1 percent. This makes the conclusion of alliances much more advantageous.

The law acknowledges the fact that no party in Italy is capable any longer of mobilising more than a quarter of the voters. A poll on October 16 had Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) as the largest party: it would secure 27.6 percent of the vote, ahead of the governing PD with 26.3 percent. The new election law is tailor-made for the right-wing alliance, which would secure close to 34 percent of the vote (Lega Nord with 14.6 percent, Forza Italia 14.2 percent and Fratelli d'Italia 5 percent). If an election were held today, the right-wing alliance would win.

The M5S would not even benefit from emerging as the strongest party. A bonus of seats for the largest party, which was contained in an earlier draft of the law, was removed from the legislation. For this reason, the M5S strongly protested the election law and voted against it. Now, it is calling on the president not to sign it into law.

Decline of the Democrats

The rise of the right is both an expression and a result of the political disintegration of the parties which emerged from the Communist Party in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This applies chiefly to the PD, but also Rifondazione, the Rainbow Left, the alliances around Nichi Vendola (a former leader in Rifondazione and president of Apulia for 10 years) and several trade union leaders.

Over the past 25 years, these forces have persistently supported the camp known as the "centre left," which alternated in power with the gangster capitalist Berlusconi and pursued the interests of Italy's banks and major corporations against the working class.

The new election law is a measure of just how little democratic norms still exist in Italy. A government that comes to power on the basis of the law has virtually no democratic legitimacy. While the law encourages alliances, they are not binding. Following the election, the strongest party on the list that wins the election can enter a coalition with an entirely different party. Everything is possible, and the voters have almost no influence on the formation of the government.

The last two prime ministers (Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni, both PD) came to power without an election. They pursued policies in the interests of big business and the EU, and trampled popular demands under foot. Both Renzi and Gentiloni launched new attacks on workers' rights, including with the introduction of the "Jobs Act," attacks on Fiat workers and the current destruction of Alitalia, where 6,000 out of 11,000 jobs are being eliminated.

At the same time, the ruling politicians continue to transfer

vast sums to the indebted banks. They have driven ahead with plans for war in Libya, and Interior Minister Marco Minniti (PD), together with the EU's Federica Mogherini (also PD), is enforcing the brutal fortress Europe policy against refugees in the Mediterranean.

As a result, the PD is experiencing an ever-deepening crisis. It has lost large sections of its base in the trade unions and municipalities, particularly following the referendum defeat of December 2016. Last February, several factions left the party, with one group joining Vendola's new party, "Italian Left." Shortly thereafter, the faction around Pier Luigi Bersani and Massimo D'Alema split off and founded a new party, "Articolo 1—Movimento Democratico e Progressista" (MDP). Another group of discontented PD members aligned themselves with the former mayor of Milan, Giuliano Pisapia. Almost all of the prominent ex-Stalinists have now left the PD.

The disappointment with the established parties initially resulted five years ago in the rise of the M5S. The party of the former comedian Grillo, which incessantly railed against "corrupt politicians," enjoyed a meteoric rise and benefited from widespread dissatisfaction. In reality, M5S sought with its nationalist policies to mobilise frustrated sections of the middle class against impoverished workers and refugees. In content, M5S shares many positions with the Lega Nord. As soon as Grillo's party was compelled to assume government responsibility, securing the positions of mayor in Rome and Turin, it quickly became clear that M5S is no less corrupt than the other parties.

The gulf between official politics and the population continues to grow. This can also be seen in the numbers of people emigrating. A report published October 17 revealed that 124,000 people left Italy in 2016, a rise of 15 percent from the previous year. Almost 40 percent of emigrants are young people between the ages of 18 and 34.

These developments are creating an enormous political vacuum, while social anger is growing. The working class and young people confront round after round of attacks. At the same time, every party—including the pseudo-left around the Italian Left and the trade unions—advances a nationalist programme that strengthens the ruling class. The country increasingly resembles a social powder keg.

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