

Italy's far-right interior minister charged with kidnapping

By Marianne Arens
30 August 2018

The state attorney in Agrigento, a city on the southern coast of Sicily, is investigating Italy's interior minister and federal secretary of the Lega (League, formerly the Northern League), Matteo Salvini, for deprivation of liberty, illegal detention and abuse of office.

Salvini oversaw the holding of 177 refugees on board the Italian coast guard ship Ubaldo Diciotti as hostages. He declared the migrants could only leave the vessel and set foot on Italian soil once other European countries promised to take them in.

Salvini threatened otherwise they would be deported back to Libya. For 10 days, Lega and the Five-Star Movement coalition government refused to allow the exhausted, desperate refugees to disembark.

The migrants were rescued from the Mediterranean by the coast guard near Lampedusa on August 16. The ship was only given permission to enter the port of Catania on August 20, and only 27 children and unaccompanied minors were then allowed to leave the ship. A further 150 refugees were forced to remain on board until Saturday, although scabies was widespread and there were several suspected cases of tuberculosis.

The migrants were finally allowed to leave the Ubaldo Diciotti on Saturday night. Non-European Union (EU) member Albania and EU member Ireland had agreed to accept 25 people each. The remaining 100 migrants were offered housing by the Italian Episcopal Conference—a desperate attempt by Pope Francis to improve the badly battered reputation of the Church following the most recent revelations of clerical child abuse.

Also on August 25, Luigi Patronaggio, the senior prosecutor in Agrigento, initiated proceedings against Salvini. He accuses the interior minister of violating both Italian and EU law. By law no one can be detained for more than 48 hours without a judge's order.

Patronaggio is a well-known figure in Italian legal circles. He has carried out investigations into Sicilian organised crime and put Marcello Dell'Utri, the mafia criminal and adviser and personal friend of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, behind bars. Berlusconi served as head of the Italian government for years in a coalition with the Lega Nord, the predecessor of Salvini's Lega.

On Sunday, Patronaggio handed over the Salvini case to the *Tribunale dei Ministri* (ministerial court) in Palermo, a special court that investigates members of the government. Referring to the refugees, Patronaggio said: "It's about people forced to leave their country and their families under painful circumstances to escape war and misery."

In truth, however, the entire European Union belongs in the dock alongside Salvini.

EU officials are responsible for the deaths of thousands who have drowned in the Mediterranean. Those rescued are among the few to have reached land safely. At the end of June, the EU decided to seal off "Fortress Europe" using the infamous Libyan coast guard to police Europe's Mediterranean shores and prevent NGO volunteers from leaving port to rescue those shipwrecked.

In so doing, the EU has condemned an unknown number of refugees to death on the open sea. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of people reaching Italy by August 22 fell from 97,500 to 19,400 compared to the same period last year. Despite this decline, 1,546 cases of drownings or missing persons were recorded during these eight months.

Salvini has reacted with aggression and scorn to the prosecutor's investigation. In front of fascist supporters in Pinzolo, in northern Italy, he placed all blame on the

EU, which he accused of being “vile and useless.” “They do not deserve our money,” so Italy will stop making contributions, he said.

Concerning the charges, Salvini said he would forgo the immunity he is entitled to as a member of the Senate. “I’m ready when they come to get me,” Salvini said, declaring the charges against him to be “a disgrace.” “They can arrest me, but not the 60 million Italians who want things to be different.”

Salvini’s provocative stance is in response to the government’s rapid loss of support. Faced with a deep economic and social crisis, he is seeking to mobilise the most right-wing forces.

The government’s policy of building up the army and police and its attacks on democratic rights are increasingly meeting with resistance. On Saturday, more than 1,000 people demonstrated in Catania calling for the release of the migrants. “They are illegally detained,” one participant told the daily *la Repubblica*. “We want to show we are in solidarity with them.”

None of the official parties were to be seen, and when members of the former ruling Democratic Party (PD) appeared, they were turned away by chanting protesters. One speaker said, “Many here are unemployed, others are students with two jobs; they work in precarious jobs or are pensioners who cannot make it to the end of the month. We can imagine how the refugees are doing: we all want to live.”

Salvini’s claim that his policy is based on “60 million Italians who want things to be different” provoked a massive wave of reaction on the Internet. Many posted statements by workers, residents and even tourists on the coast countering the propaganda of the Lega. A meeting between Salvini and the Hungarian Premier Viktor Orbán in Milan this week was accompanied by protests.

With its fascist baiting, the government is trying to distract attention from growing tensions. A massive financial crisis lurks in the background that will not allow the Lega and the Five-Star Movement to fulfil any of their election promises. The governing parties had promised to restore pensions, introduce a basic income and cut taxes—policies costing billions that are now evaporating in the wind.

The recent collapse of the Morandi Bridge in Genoa, which claimed 43 lives, exposed the ailing state of the

Italian economy and society. Hundreds of people were made homeless and still lack proper aid and a roof over their heads.

In September, the government will present its 2019 budget and the EU then has to approve it. This helps explain the aggressive propaganda by government members against the EU. Along with Salvini, his coalition partner Luigi Di Maio (Five-Star Movement) has announced that Italy will “no longer transfer euros” to the EU.

Italy has the second largest public debt in the EU after Greece (€2.3 trillion) [US\$ 2.7 trillion], and Finance Minister Giovanni Tria faces the serious problem of refinancing several hundred billion euros’ worth of bank loans. At the same time, there are three deadlines looming regarding Italian creditworthiness. Rating agencies Fitch, Moody’s and Standard & Poor’s will give their ratings on August 31, September 7 and October 26, respectively.

The Italian government of the Lega and the Five-Star Movement can only hold on to power and propagate their right-wing filth because there is no effective opposition and the working class lacks a party capable of providing it a socialist perspective.

In particular the phoney “leftist” politicians on the fringes of the former Democratic Party are trying to absorb and neutralise the resistance of working people. After shielding the anti-working-class policies of various centre-left governments for years, they are now firmly opposed to mobilising resistance to the new government’s fascist policies. For such forces even the investigations by prosecutor Patronaggio go too far. Several pseudo-left politicians have scornfully dismissed them, claiming they merely fuel Salvini’s far-right propaganda.

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