

The MSI: ?The cudgel and the double breasted suit?

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Italy is the only western European state in which a fascist party has joined a government since 1945.¹ The entry of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) into the coalition government of Silvio Berlusconi prompted alarm amongst the left in Italy and around the world. It also provoked some revealing reactions from the bosses' press. The Economist reassured its readers:

'Hitler and Stalin were monsters. Mussolini by comparison was a farmyard rooster . . . the true mark of fascism, belief in a peculiar variety of one-party corporate state?not, it should be said, a belief shared by this newspaper?is not Nazism or racism. Let the word 'fascist' be reserved for those who profess that belief, and today's neo-fascists be judged for their own ideas, not Hitler's.'

The British bourgeoisie's favourite coffee-table magazine 'judged' that the MSI could usefully provide some stability to Berlusconi's Thatcherite government. So they tried to play down the crimes of Mussolini, the man described by MSI leader, Gianfranco Fini, as the greatest statesman in Italian history. The forcible destruction of the Italian trade unions, socialist and communist parties, the killing of thousands upon thousands of political opponents are for the Economist the actions of a 'farmyard rooster'.

If we judge the MSI from its own history, leadership, ideology and actions we can indeed justifiably claim that the MSI is fascist. But it is a fascism that has had to come to terms with the defeat of Hitler and Mussolini and accommodate itself to a long period of bourgeois democracy and capitalist prosperity. In these conditions fascism was condemned to a marginal existence, forcing fascist organisations, such as the MSI, to adapt and embrace constitutionalist allies and policies associated with the non-fascist right. At the same time, within their ranks there remains a significant layer of committed fascist cadres determined to exploit any constitutional successes for more far-reaching purposes.

It is the very success of this strategy for Italian fascism in the March 1994 elections, when compared with similar efforts undertaken by the German and French far right, that now confronts Fini and his electoral front organisation, the Alleanza Nazionale (AN - National Alliance), with a profound dilemma.

The contradiction at the root of the MSI's present crisis can be traced back to the party's origins. It has shaped the development of the party at every stage in its forty-nine year history. The MSI was founded as an outright fascist party in 1946 as a direct successor to the proscribed Fascist Party of Mussolini. Unlike analogous attempts to re-establish fascist organisations in post-war Europe, such as the abortive attempt to rebuild the NSDAP in West Germany under the name Sozialistische Reichspartei (SRP), the MSI was not itself banned, but was tolerated by the post-fascist Italian Republic. Its connection to the fascist past was never clandestine or publicly denied; indeed its very name was drawn directly from the official title of the Salò republic, the Northern Italian fascist state ruled over by Mussolini under German military protection after he was deposed by the King in 1943. Many of the MSI's leaders had formerly been

officials of the Repubblica Sociale Italiano (RSI).

The MSI resisted the efforts of the Committee for National Liberation to prevent the reorganisation of fascist activists and officials, while at the same time successfully seeking to rally the scattered groupings of hardline fascists under the banner of a single hegemonic far right party. The MSI's programme was initially one of undiluted historical Italian fascism, stressing nationalism, the corporate state, opposition to the constitution and to the peace treaty being promoted by the allies and which had been accepted by the Christian Democracy (DC).

The party could rely on little support within the newly reconstructed state apparatus. Even the army was largely shut off to the MSI as a result of the 1943-45 civil war and the absence in the post-war army of any top-ranking officers who had fought on the fascist side in the conflict. Although the MSI secured only 1.9% of the vote in the 1948 elections, the very fact of its survival was a considerable achievement.

Yet the development of the political situation in post-war Italy rapidly demonstrated to the MSI leaders that if they were to preserve and extend the organisational integrity and influence of the party, a cautious accommodation to bourgeois democracy would be unavoidable. It was this that allowed the MSI, over the coming years, to build up its strength, consolidate, and remain connected to mainstream political life in a manner that no other European fascist party was able to do.

In the post-war decades the MSI consistently polled between 5 and 8% of the vote in national elections. Its membership has always been high. During the 1960s it claimed one million members, principally in its strongholds in the south. In 1994 it still boasted a membership of over 100,000 in more than 1,000 branches. It controls youth, women's and trade union front organisations.

Yet the MSI has been constantly beset with problems arising from the contradiction between its necessary accommodation to bourgeois democracy and its fascist heritage. This has led to a number of phases in the MSI's development.

The relative political instability of the Italian parliamentary system and the strength of the Communist Party (PCI) provided the MSI with numerous opportunities for de facto pacts and agreements with the DC against the Socialists and Communists. But the party's first leader, Giorgio Almirante, adopted a classical fascist approach, emphasising opposition to the democratic regime and engaging in social demagoguery to build a petit-bourgeois and peasant movement against the political establishment and post-war domestic order.

Credentials

By 1950 Almirante had been forced to resign and was replaced by Alfredo de Marsanich, a former fascist government official and leader of the 'moderate' faction in the MSI. The party now emphasised its anti-Communist credentials, allied itself with the Monarchist Party, adopted a specifically pro-clerical stance, expressed support for NATO (a military pact between the hated wartime Allies) and attempted to form an electoral bloc with the DC for the 1952 local elections in Rome. The fruits of recasting the MSI as an arch pro-establishment party rather than a petit-bourgeois anti-establishment party was a substantial increase in its vote, to 11.8% in those elections.

By 1956 the moderates were firmly in the leadership under Arturo Michelini. This led to a sizeable split of hardline fascists under Pino Rauti, who left to form the Ordine Nuovo (New Order) group. The introduction of an accommodationist strategy - *insertimento* - saw the MSI's parliamentary fraction supporting successive DC governments and even becoming the key force backing the government of Giuseppe Tambroni in 1960.

But the success of the insertimento in bringing the MSI close to participation in government had not led the it to abandon physical confrontation. As one account points out, a corollary of the MSI's attempt to cast itself as the pro-system party par excellence was a stepping up of violent street battles with the left during the strikes and demonstrations of the 1960s.³

Shift

The next shift in the MSI's approach resulted from the failure of the insertimento strategy. The role of the MSI in underpinning Tambroni provoked a massive and militant response from the left, leading to street battles across Italy and tens of deaths. Demonstrators prevented the MSI's congress from taking place. The government fell and was replaced by a centre-left coalition.

The 1960s saw mounting ideological disunity within the MSI, culminating in Almirante's return to the party leadership at the end of the decade. His new policy involved fusing with or incorporating other rightist parties, such as the Monarchists, a renewed emphasis on street confrontation, and alliances with sections of the state apparatus who were becoming increasingly alarmed by student rebellion, the continuing strength of the PCI and rising trade union militancy. This was the period of the 'strategy of tension', in which direct collaboration between fascist groups—including the MSI itself—and sections of the police and military resulted in a series of urban bombings designed to foment social instability and create the conditions for a future military coup.

Ordine Nuovo, which had been readmitted to the party, now exerted a controlling influence over party organisations and policy. Yet at the same time, the MSI launched an attempt to construct a new broader party of the far right, the Destra Nazionale, and continued publicly to declare its support for democracy and the system. This twin-track approach—the Strategia Del Doppio Binario—was acknowledged by Almirante himself.

Further shifts were to follow. The 'moderates' split from the MSI in 1977, and anti-system demagogy resurfaced alongside an eclectic attempt to construct a 'new' 'third way' ideology. The party's growing youth organisations managed to combine support for this radicalism with a strong mood for a halt to the street fighting and terror of the 1970s.

System

Throughout the 1980s, the party continued to debate its relationship to the political system and the fascist past, usually combining elements of false radicalism and anti-capitalist rhetoric with attempts at opportunistic alliances with other major parties. After the 'Historic Compromise', when the Stalinists of the PCI announced that they would be prepared to enter a coalition with the Christian Democrats, the MSI responded with declarations of its preparedness to bloc with the reformist social democrats of the PSI against any alliance of the DC and the PCI.

This ideological shift was reflected in changes in the party leadership, with the current 'moderate' leader Fini replacing the extreme radical-fascist Pino Rauti in 1990. Recent events have allowed Fini to bring the MSI 'in from the cold', that is, into government and into the mainstream of Italian political life. Above all, the MSI was able to capitalise on the deep crisis of the Italian political system that resulted from the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the end of the Cold War.

After the Second World War, Italy's Communist Party was the largest in western Europe. Its roots in industry and its links to the USSR prompted the capitalist class to exclude it from government permanently. From 1945 the bourgeoisie constructed a shifting alliance of conservative, liberal and social democratic parties which, though their coalitions were invariably unstable and frequently changing, nevertheless succeeded in keeping the PCI out of the 54 separate governments that have held office since the war.

For the bourgeoisie, the threat posed by the PCI demanded a strong and united conservative party capable of retaining power. At the centre of this system was the Christian Democracy, a party established from former Catholic politicians of the pre-war Peoples' Party, the peasantry and former functionaries of the bloated state machine of the fascist years.

Methods

The methods used to consolidate the disparate social forces that made up the DC's support—bourgeoisie, peasantry, urban petit-bourgeoisie and state bureaucratic functionaries—involved anti-communism, Catholic ideology and bribery and corruption throughout the political system.⁴ It is estimated that under DC coalition governments between 5 and 10% of the value of all contracts with state companies was paid to professional politicians in the form of bribes.

Furthermore, the legacy of Mussolini's corporatism could be seen in mainstays of Christian Democratic policy, such as support for state holding companies and nationalisations in basic industries like energy, subsidies to the peasantry and small proprietors and the enlargement and protection of the massive state bureaucracy. These policies became increasingly dysfunctional for the Italian bourgeoisie throughout the 1980s. State owned industries and services proved expensive to maintain and run and constituted a barrier to private capital accumulation and profit generation.

With the collapse of Stalinism and its devastating effect on the PCI, neo-liberal reformers within the bourgeoisie and the judiciary saw their chance to commence a controlled reconstruction of the political system. A series of dramatic corruption investigations, trials and convictions of leading politicians (known as Tangentopoli) effectively destroyed the DC and its longstanding ally, the Socialist Party (PSI). Some 30% of parliamentary representatives were charged, including PSI leader Craxi and most notably Andreotti, the grand old man of Christian Democracy.

Remnants

The PCI metamorphosed into the Party of the Democratic Left (PDS), breaking from the last ideological remnants of its Stalinist past. It split with the remaining pro-Stalinist 'hard liners' of the Rifondazione Comunista and swiftly reconstituted itself as a right-wing social democratic party vying for the job of carrying out the capitalists' neo-liberal austerity programme of cuts in state expenditure and privatisations.

Still the bourgeoisie preferred not to entrust 'the executive committee for the management of their affairs' to the former Stalinists. Big capital responded to the dissolution of the old political system through the speedy construction of a new right-wing electoral coalition, the Freedom Alliance. At the head of this stood media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi. With the introduction of a new, less democratic, electoral system based on a British-style 'first-past-the-post' system in place of proportional representation, Berlusconi used local rump groupings from the old parties, string-pulling and of course hard cash, to set up a new neo-liberal party, Forza Italia.

This 'miracle' had to be accomplished at breakneck speed. Berlusconi's artificial construct would not have been able to win an election alone and thus exclude the PDS from office. For this reason Berlusconi turned not only to the relatively new Lega Nord (which had polled 8.6% in the general election of April 1992, 22% in local elections in Turin in June 1993 and as much as 57.1% in Pordenone), but also to the MSI, a far more long-standing and established formation with a mass membership. Moreover, the MSI's exclusion from power since its formation in 1946 left it the only established national party free from the taint of corruption following the Tangentopoli scandals of 1992-4.

The wave of scandals transformed the MSI's prospects. The table on page 13 sets out their electoral fortunes between 1984 and 1994.

The major breakthrough was the local elections in late 1993, which took place after the great Tangentopoli scandal had broken and become the major issue of the campaign, and of course after the introduction of the new electoral system after the April 1993 referendum. The DC and PSI vote collapsed. Most significantly, for the MSI's subsequent development, in certain major cities it emerged during the local elections as the main party of the right.

The system of successive rounds of ballots enabled the MSI to win support from those right-wing voters whose preferred choices were eliminated in the earlier rounds. In Naples Alessandra Mussolini's granddaughter of the fascist leader Benito Mussolini massively improved on her poll of 9.2% in the previous local elections. In the first round in 1993 she received 31.2% of the vote, rising to 44% by the second round. The MSI's candidate in Trieste polled 47% in the final round. In Rome, Fini stood. Significantly, as the best-placed candidate of the right he now received public backing from Silvio Berlusconi. He won 36% in the first and 47% in the second round.

Fini concluded that the MSI could now constitute itself as the main party of the right in the new Italy. The precondition for this would be to win and retain the support of former DC voters who might back the MSI against the left, but who would not do so if it meant identifying themselves openly with historic Italian fascism. For this reason Fini declared that the MSI was now 'post-fascist'.

Berlusconi's support for Fini in the Rome local elections, the emergence of Forza Italia and the proposal for a right-wing electoral bloc - the Freedom Alliance - provided Fini and the MSI leadership with an opportunity to enter government. What is more, the MSI had the chance to share power with arriviste, relatively right-wing conservative allies. Neither Forza nor the Lega could compare with the MSI when it came to the combination of a solid mass membership, organisation and a national presence. The party could reasonably expect to emerge as the strongest component of the coalition and win support as a force for 'stability' and order.

Ideology

This was too good a prospect for Fini to allow history or ideology to threaten it. The contradiction between fascist ideology and goals on the one hand and bourgeois democratic realpolitik on the other 'the very contradiction which had dogged the MSI from its foundation' would now have to be resolved.

Fini lost no time. Within a month of the local election results he announced the formation of the Alleanza Nazionale. This was an idea that had been in the pipeline for over a year, having first been mooted as a possible means of taking advantage of the new electoral system. The concept was clearly based in part on the Destra Nazionale promoted in the Almirante era. But there was an important difference. The Destra Nazionale project had been an integral component of Almirante's twin-track strategy of 'the cudgel and the double-breasted suit', providing a fig-leaf of respectability while the fascist MSI gangs and youth organisations stepped up their campaign of street terror. For the Rauti wing of the MSI the AN could play such a role again.

The general election of March 1994 returned a decisive majority for the coalition of Silvio Berlusconi's neo-liberal conservative Forza Italia, the separatist Lega Nord of Umberto Bossi and the AN. The latter was founded in January 1994 as an electoral front for the fascist MSI. The AN received five million votes, some 13.5% of the poll. Five AN members, a majority of whom were also members of the MSI, entered the new coalition cabinet; 12 of the 37 junior ministers were from the AN. Senior posts included communications, culture and the position of Deputy Prime Minister, which went to Giuseppe Tatarella of the MSI. Junior appointments included justice, education, foreign affairs and defence.

By January 1995, exactly one year after the AN's foundation, the MSI formally wound itself up, merging

into the AN. Yet the AN is entirely under the control of the MSI and has been since its foundation. The first and main official of the AN, Adolfo Urso, was appointed by Fini; he formerly worked on the MSI's newspaper *Il Secolo d'Italia*. The AN has produced no manifesto of its own and there seems little to suggest that the MSI could not force its will on the rest of the alliance.⁵ Even if Urso's claims of 40,000 new non-MSI members joining the AN after the election proved accurate, this would still leave the MSI with a decisive majority in the AN.

This hegemony is reflected in the composition of those holding the AN's parliamentary, Euro-parliamentary and ministerial positions. Non-MSI members constitute a clear minority. Of the two non-MSI AN ministers (dealing with the cultural and transport portfolios) one is a former member of the Monarchist party which merged with the MSI in 1972 at the height of its *Almirante* period and the other was previously a Christian Democrat.

Given the total control over the AN by the former MSI leadership it is tempting to treat the AN as being nothing more than a means by which unreconstructed fascists can conceal their true political nature and goals. But this would only partly explain the development of the MSI-AN over the last two years. There are real divisions within the MSI itself, engendered by Fini's strategy. For the closer the MSI has come to power the more the conflict between 'moderates' and 'hardliners' has been coming to a head.

At the centre of the current conflict is the future direction of the AN. It was formed as a fascist front to fight the elections, and it remains so. However, Fini wants the AN to play a far more significant role than this in his future political strategy. The broader, more 'respectable' conservative front party is intended not merely to supplement and disguise the MSI, but formally to supplant it.

The modern roots of the conflict go back to *Almirante's* death in 1988 which provoked an increasingly sharp dispute between the two wings of the party. At the beginning of the 1990s one Italian commentator wrote of the conflict between Fini and Pino Rauti:

'The former is looking to be a party of protest and institutional reform, while the latter wishes to be a movement of dissent, a 'community party'. The two strategies are miles apart.'⁶

Pino Rauti is no minor figure in the history of Italian fascism and the MSI. He was central to the *Ordine Nuovo* split in the 1950s—the first major attempt by hard line fascists to prevent the MSI adapting to bourgeois democracy. As head of ON he exercised considerable influence over MSI policy after ON's readmission to the party, and has held the position of party leader. Today he is an AN Member of the European parliament.

This and the strength of Rauti's support in the MSI obliges even Fini to take account of the strong association with the fascist *ventennio* that is built into the MSI's one party election slogan in 1970 was *Nostalgia Dell'Avvenire* (nostalgia for the future). The MSI held a major national commemoration of Mussolini on the centenary of his birth in 1983, and the image of *Il Duce* wearing a military helmet remains a powerful image in MSI iconography and in the graffiti of its youth leagues. Nor is reverence for the fascist years a thing of the past. As recently as 1992, 50,000 joined a march in Rome called in the dictator's memory.

Aligned

It is no coincidence that the Rome organisation of the MSI is led by forces closely aligned with the Pino Rauti wing of the movement. The head of the MSI's Rome federation was Teodoro Buontempo. He was previously the leader of the *Fronte Della Gioventu* (Youth Front—the youth organisation of the MSI), and has in the past been closely involved in attempts to link up with and encompass a sizeable umbrella

grouping of Nazi skinheads known as the Movimento Politico (MP). The MP is linked to the international 'Naziskin' cultural movement Blood and Honour, and has been implicated in numerous terrorist attacks on immigrants, Jews and gypsies.

Throughout its long history, the MSI has retained the core features of a fascist party. It has maintained organised fighting groups through its youth and street groupings, has conducted periodic street violence against its left-wing proletarian and student opponents and has maintained close links with clandestine terrorist organisations. In its ideology and its propaganda it remains associated with the former fascist states of Mussolini. The relatively stable democratic order in post-war Italy has created powerful tendencies within its ranks pushing for the abandonment of fascist strategy and ideology, but until the most recent crisis these tendencies have not proved sufficiently strong to effect a qualitative transformation into a non-fascist right wing conservative party.

Realising what is at stake, the disbandment of the MSI and its absorption into the AN was resisted by those leading MSI members most closely aligned with the fight against Fini's adaptation to democratic respectability: Rauti, Buontempo and Mirko Tremaglia. The latter is head of the foreign affairs commission in the Italian parliament and achieved notoriety after calling for the return to Italy of territories granted to Slovenia in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Having failed to prevent the formal dissolution of the MSI, Rauti and Buontempo are fighting for the soul of the AN. They hope to prevent the AN adopting neo-liberal free market economic policies in place of the traditional corporatism of the Italian fascist movement.

Finance

The MSI's main base, since its foundation, has been in the underdeveloped south of the country, an area dependent on state finance and enormous subsidies to the public sector. It is hardly surprising that free marketeers who have recently joined the AN are encountering opposition from longstanding MSI corporatists. After the 1994 election victory, Giandomenico Caselino, head of the regional MSI federation in Lecce, Puglia, declared to the Guardian newspaper:

'Be clear about one thing. Between us and Berlusconi is only a strategic alliance. We are the MSI. We are not libertarian or liberals of any kind. For us, the market is organic and organised.'

Finì sees it differently. Within the AN Finì and the dominant faction of the MSI are seeking to steer the entire formation away from fascism towards 'mainstream', albeit very right-wing, bourgeois democratic conservatism. The collapse of Berlusconi's shortlived Freedom Alliance government in December 1994 means there is a possibility of early elections and a chance for the AN to increase its support.

In the November/December 1994 local elections the MSI gained votes at the expense of Forza Italia. Further success could consolidate the AN's position as the largest and most organisationally cohesive party of the right. This in turn could well increase the pressure on Finì to demonstrate his bona fides to the non-fascist electorate (especially in the North) and to remove the risk of further embarrassment altogether by a radical break with Rauti et al, even to the point of splitting the party.

The Italian bourgeoisie desperately need a stable party to represent their interests. The DC has collapsed and its replacement 'the Popular Party' remains too compromised to win serious support from the electorate. The PDS, despite its bourgeois politics, remains the former Communist Party and its links to the working class movement mean that a substantial section of the bourgeoisie would prefer to see it kept out of power. Certainly it is not a preferred instrument of bourgeois rule.

The Lega Nord is not a nationally organised party and the main sections of the haute bourgeoisie do not favour the dismemberment of the Italian state. Berlusconi's party failed to consolidate its coalition government and fell before it could see through its austerity programme against the resistance of the working class. The local elections of the winter 1994 saw a catastrophic collapse of Forza Italia's support.

So Fini correctly estimates that he now has an opportunity to challenge seriously for power and perhaps to gain it, or at least secure a permanent role in the shifting combinations and coalitions that have characterised Italian governments since the war. What is more, in doing so he could actually serve the interests of the capitalist class by resolving their crisis of political leadership and carrying through their desired austerity drive.

But on one condition. No significant section of the Italian bourgeoisie currently wants fascism, because they do not need it. They have not reached the stage where they might need to turn to the policy of last resort.

Whereas in the past Fini has together with Buontempo encouraged and liaised with violent skinhead organisations in Rome, attempting to bring them under the discipline of the MSI, today he goes out of his way to condemn them. The skinheads and black shirted youths who are prone to giving the fascist salute at rallies and demonstrations are now being actively discouraged from doing so by Fini's bodyguards.

But formal renunciation of the past and efforts to isolate and marginalise the elements who look to Mussolini's squadristi as a model for organising today are one thing; actually breaking with them and removing their influence is another thing entirely. Fini's concern at the negative effect fascist violence might have on his political ambitions was fuelled in 1993 when on 1 April a troop of MSI youth burst into the Italian parliament and held a violent demonstration, blockading the building and breaking windows.⁸ As a result 20 members of the Fronte della Gioventu and 11 MSI MPs were charged with insulting parliament and glorifying fascism.

Only days beforehand MSI members had attacked the headquarters of both the social democratic and former Stalinist trade union federations and the offices of the metalworkers' union in Naples, prompting 30,000 workers to demonstrate in response. But since April 1993 there have been no further reports of organised MSI violence on the streets. Fini has succeeded so far in restraining the squads and the violent elements within the youth leagues.

Remove

Whether he will be able to remove them from the party altogether or is even capable of mounting a serious campaign to do so remains to be seen.

The new 'non-political' bourgeois government, drawn from key representatives of the ruling class in the banking, industrial and military sectors, may not last for long given it only has grudging support from the Freedom Alliance and faces open hostility from the AN. Italy is far from resolving its political crisis. The development of the AN depends on how this crisis unfolds. To return to government with the blessing of a section of the bourgeoisie, Fini will need to further sever the AN from its fascist past and commit it to free market Thatcherite economic policies.

But there remains an alternative scenario. If the crisis deepens, and if the 54th government of the post-war period meets with serious resistance from the working class, then important sections of the ruling class may seek to mobilise a mass force to take direct action against the workers' movement. When they do they will know where to look. Unless the AN splits publicly from the Rauti wing, the youth leagues, the fascist regional party bosses and their blackshirted thugs, it will remain a party capable of reasserting all

the features of fully fledged fascism, and of converting its membership into a reactionary mass movement mobilised against the workers' organisations and all democratic liberties.

Endnotes

1 Spain and Portugal entered the post-war period with pre-established bonapartist dictatorships of fascist origin.

2 The Economist April 9 1994

3 Roberto Chiarini, 'The Movimento Sociale Italiano: A Historical Profile', in Neo-Fascism in Europe, Cheles, Ferguson and Vaughan (eds) Longman 1991 p31-33.

4 'The Criminal Core of Italian Capitalism', Marco Zucci, Trotskyist International 11 1993

5 C.E.R.A., op cit p56.

6 R Chiarini, op cit, p39. See also P. Ignazi, Il Polo escluso. Profilo del Movimento Sociale Italiano, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1989 pp213-49.

7 See Workers Power 178

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