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BERLUSCONI'S VICTORY DEFEATS ITALY

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The war between the two leaders of the Italian right, Silvio Berlusconi and Gianfranco Fini, finally has a victor. Silvio Berlusconi's government won a vote of confidence in both houses of the Italian parliament. In the Chamber of Deputies the winning margin was just three votes.

Gianfranco Fini seems to be the loser but the real loser of this battle is Italy, which continues to be ungoverned and ungovernable, in the grip of a serious economic crisis and, the fact is, lacking any alternative. The country can only stand by and witness the long-drawn-out death of its decadent government.

This is an Italy vanquished in the very heart of its institutions, by the buying and selling of parliamentarians' votes, which took place in broad daylight in the highest instances of representation of the people of Italy. Members of one party voted for the its rival, others bartered mortgage payoffs for a vote (the judiciary has taken legal measures in two cases of corruption) and parliamentarians yelled and exchanged blows in the middle of the sitting, all of which adds up to the image of a country in full-blown decadence, the feel of a *fin de regime*.

If Fini does not cave in and resign (it seems unlikely that he will do so), Berlusconi will be unable to govern the country with his three-vote margin. The crisis has only been adjourned and, in the absence of significant changes, it was adjourned for a very short time.

As for the political substance of this story, I believe there are three elements worth highlighting. The first harks back to the past and to the origins of this struggle between Fini and Berlusconi. The second pertains to the present and the country's thoroughgoing political and moral crisis, while the third refers to the future, which is to say the political and institutional consequences of this breach.

In the case of the past, one might recall that the present crisis began with the strengthening of the Northern League in the local elections last spring. Fini, upstaged by Bossi's landslide victory, tried to relaunch some policies of the institutional, pro-Europe and anti-populist right, thus making a point of his dif-

ferences with Berlusconi's and Bossi's populism. From this standpoint, the recent events in the Italian parliament signal the rout of the constitutional Italian right. Fini can no longer speak from the right but only through new alliances with the Christian-democratic centre that had already broken with Berlusconi. The vote of confidence confirms the ascendancy of xenophobic populism in the Italian right, cancelling out the voices of internal opposition and alternative in its political arena. "Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia" (Future and Freedom for Italy) is the second former Berlusconi ally that has crossed over to the opposition. Now a new battle is underway and nobody knows how it will end because the Italian parliament is more polarised today than it was before. There are no right and left but only pro-Berlusconi and anti-Berlusconi factions, both in the parliament and in the country.

As for the present, one should note that the vote came in the wake of a series of scandals that have enthralled a crisis-ridden country in which the crisis is not talked about. A report released a week ago by the Bank of Italy reveals that tax revenues have fallen by 1.8% and the public deficit has risen by 5.9% with respect to the figures for 2009. Moreover, the streets of the Italian cities are ablaze with the protests of students and temporary workers, those of Naples are invaded by garbage, and in L'Alquila they are still full of rubble.

There is little to say about the future. Berlusconi is determined to drag Italy down into his decadence. The result of this vote of confidence establishes that there is no alternative coalition to that of Berlusconi and rules out the possibility of any provisional technical government tasked with changing the shameful electoral law, facing up to the emergencies arising from the economic crisis and calling new elections. The left was so focused on bringing down Berlusconi's government that it neglected to organise an alternative in case it fell.

One can only wait. Berlusconi's government will fall soon because of its own internal attrition: in recent weeks it has suffered a number of defeats in parliament. It will probably be Bossi's Northern League that "snuffs out" this government in which it participates. The most likely scenario is new elections next spring and, in this eventuality, there would be three coalitions in the picture, as the recent vote indicates the appearance of a third centre grouping, somewhere between the Berlusconi-Bossi and the centre-left alliances. However, the decline is not Berlusconi's alone. The moral wear and tear now afflicts public space, the institutions and the very ethics of the country. It is highly likely that the dismal, ignominious spectacle we have witnessed in the Italian parliament will be repeated.