

## Up for Grabs

Amy K. Rosenthal

ROME, ITALY—Until late December, a political transformation appeared to be brewing in Italy. After almost five years in power, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's ruling center-right coalition seemed to have lost its grip on the Italian electorate. A recent poll in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* told the story; Italians believe that their country's economy has worsened, and that its politicians are increasingly corrupt. Moreover, many are critical of Berlusconi's policies, including his government's support of the war in Iraq, his pro-Israel and pro-U.S. positions, and his constant rhetoric in favor of liberal economic policies. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that polls were predicting a landslide victory for the center-left, led by former European Union President Romano Prodi, in the upcoming national elections in April.

Today, however, things are not so clear-cut. For the center-left, which has long paid enormous lip service to its "moral superiority" over Berlusconi and his political allies, is now itself embroiled in a major scandal. The crisis revolves around two leaders of the Democrats of the Left (DS), Piero Fassino and Massimo D'Alema, who are currently under investigation for their roles in the hostile corporate takeover of the Italian bank Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (BNL). The fallout has been considerable; since the scandal became public, surveys have shown declining support for the center-left, putting its chances of an April victory at serious risk.

Still, some Italian analysts believe all is not lost. The DS may be the biggest faction of the "political family" that makes up the center-left, but it is not the only one. The coalition also includes two former communist parties (Rifondazione Comunista and the Italian Communists) on the left and the Catholic Margherita and Udeur parties on the right. Experts are therefore predicting that many center-left voters will simply opt to vote for one of the other parties that make up their preferred coalition.

As these shifts indicate, Italy is entering a season of political crisis similar to the early 1990s. Back then, the scandals that rocked the Italian political system saw the fall of its post-war political giants, the Christian Democratic and Socialist parties. Today, it is the DS that is in the hot seat, but it is still unknown to what degree it will be de-legitimized in the run-up to the April 8th elections. Neither, however, is the extent of the Italian electorate's continued support for Berlusconi clear.

The outcome could profoundly affect Italy's foreign policy orientation. If the center-right wins, Italy will remain on its current path: pro-U.S., pro-Israel and supportive of the war in Iraq. On the other hand, if the center-left wins, Italy's foreign policy will venture into the unknown. Part of the Italian left—in particular, the Italian Communists, the Greens and the left wing of the DS—has repeatedly called for an immediate withdrawal of all Italian troops from Iraq.



Amy K. ROSENTHAL is a journalist for the *Il Foglio*, Italy's leading conservative daily.

These parties have also emerged as outspoken critics of the Bush administration's policies in the Middle East, especially the notion of democracy promotion. By contrast, centrist and right-wing forces within the coalition—including segments of the DS and the Margherita, Udeur, Italian Social Democratic and Radical parties—take a very different stand on all of these issues.

Opponents of the center-left have speculated that its victory would legitimize the “Islamization” of Italy, given Prodi's preoccupation with enlarging the EU to include a number of volatile Middle East states, among them Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. Those less skeptical, meanwhile, have concluded that the left will not seek to alienate the United States or upset its efforts in the Middle East, and that Italian foreign policy will not undergo any significant changes, regardless of who emerges victorious.

In the end, much depends on the current political scandal. For now, the polls still project a center-left electoral victory in April. But the historic party of ethics and morality in Italian politics has clearly been damaged, perhaps irreparably so. Its mistake was claiming to be something it most definitely is not. And this might just be enough to sway the already disillusioned Italian electorate to back Berlusconi once again.

