

Difficult times ahead in Italy, with the Lombard League

by Leonardo Servadio

In the course of the last two of the seven years of his mandate, the President of the Italian Republic, Francesco Cossiga, wanted to play the role of the Shakespearean jester. With an unbroken series of “utterings,” he spelled out important elements of truth concerning the Italian political situation: He denounced the creators of the terrorism which threatened Italy during the late 1970s, hidden and protected in their university chairs; denounced the emergence of the Lombard League as a destructive phenomenon for Italy; denounced financier Carlo De Benedetti as a friend of the Italian Communist Party who had removed billions of liras from the Banco Ambrosiano, shortly before this bank went bankrupt and its president, Roberto Calvi, was found hanged under the London Black Friars Bridge.

Cossiga plays the gadfly

Never had an Italian politician spoken so openly and polemically about current events; never before had a President of the Republic—whose role as head of state but not head of government has been more ceremonial than practical—taken direct part in the political debate.

Cossiga's main target was the “associative” way of managing power in Italy, determined by the party which has been permanently in power, the Christian Democracy (DC), in a conflictual cooperation with the other mass-based party, the Italian Communist Party, which is now called the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS).

In politics, many important and good things can be said for the wrong reason, and vice versa. Cossiga's aim was, and remains, that of changing the present parliamentary system into a presidential system.

The turmoil that broke out in Italian political life with the elections of April 6-7, has opened a season of institutional reforms: Very likely in the next months there will be an electoral reform which will aim to establish a mechanism to guarantee that a ruling majority will automatically emerge from the national elections, so as to avoid the traditional wheeling and dealing among the various parties, in determining the government majority and who gets what ministerial portfolio.

Cossiga hoped to get this chance in order to push through the presidential system. The day after the elections, with an incredible lack of style, he flew to the United States and

met President Bush—something all the more suspicious at a moment when the U.S. was ostensibly planning a sort of new “Gulf war” against Qaddafi's Libya, which would bring Italy to her knees, since Italy imports over 30% of its oil supply from that country. Shortly before leaving for Washington, Cossiga threatened that if the parties were not able to reach an agreement for a new government majority, he would establish a “government of the President,” i.e., he would autonomously name all the members of the government with consulting Parliament.

A couple of weeks later, on April 25, the day on which Italy commemorates the liberation from fascism, Cossiga announced his resignation. In his speech to the nation, he said that Italy needed, above all else, a strong President, and that he could not be such a President, having been elected by a Parliament which no longer exists (after the latest round of elections, over 50% of Parliament were new members).

Scalfaro takes over

Two days before Cossiga's announcement, something important had happened, something which likely had a great influence on Cossiga's decision to resign: Oscar Luigi Scalfaro was elected by the new House of Deputies as its president. Scalfaro is a convinced and outspoken Catholic, of an independent mind, and is recognized by everybody as an honest man—which, in a country like Italy now, full of corruption scandals at all levels of the public administration, is not of secondary importance. He belongs to the tiny group of parliamentarians who have been in Parliament ever since its creation; as a matter of fact, he took part in the process which led to the definition of the Italian constitutional charter, and this gives him considerable authority. A longstanding anti-communist, he was an undersecretary in the Tambroni government in 1961, which repressed the attempts of Communist Party to take power by police force; now Scalfaro is on the same side as the PDS—the former Communist Party—in the defense of the primacy of Parliament and against the presidential system.

In fact, in the past months, Scalfaro was the only one who, in a series of interviews, defended the parliamentary system against Cossiga's attacks, strongly criticizing the President. His election as president of the House clearly represents a rebellion of the House against Cossiga. For this

reason Cossiga left, and launched his latest appeal to the people for a President strong enough to check the Parliament.

The other aspect of this institutional dispute is, obviously, its economic angle. The Italian state is theoretically bankrupt, since the public debt last year surpassed the Gross National Product, and keeps growing, while the balance of trade, permanently in the red, leaves little room for great hope in the future.

Italy is already the country in Europe which has the highest level of taxation, but now new harsh measures are looming. All this means that more repression and more use of force by public authority will be needed: This is the prediction repeatedly spelled out by the "ideologue" of the Lombard League, Prof. Gianfranco Miglio, an old political scientist who has always been the visible head of those who have, ever since the immediate postwar period, pushed for the presidential system. Miglio, like Cossiga, professes to be Catholic, but at present the League's policy of reshaping the institutions in order to meet certain harsh economic measures is dictated by the most classic free-marketeering "capitalist" attitude: something totally contrary to the attitude of Pope John Paul II, who, in the words of some old-fashioned Communists, has remained the only one who criticizes capitalism.

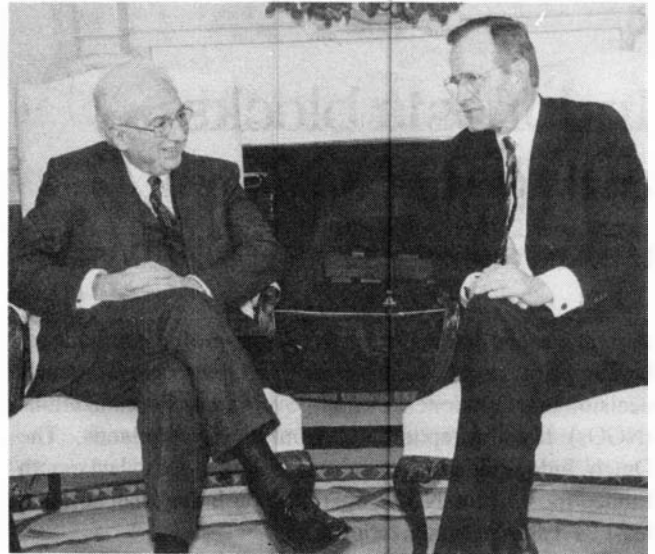
So the political conflict ongoing in Italy can be viewed along the usual lines: the Catholics versus the oligarchists. The problem is that the latter, with the complicity of the corrupt public officialdom, have been able to significantly erode the electoral base of the parties which most directly represent the interest of the people: the Christian Democracy and the PDS.

Those who are supporting the "presidential option" are a wide array of small forces, ranging from the Social Movement (MSI), the former Fascist Party of Benito Mussolini; to the Socialist Party of Bettino Craxi, which, we should remember, is where Mussolini started his political career; to the Liberal Party, something very similar to the U.S. Republican Party; to the Lombard League, which took part in the elections as the "North League," i.e., an alliance of all the regionalist leagues in northern Italy. De facto, although not explicitly, this option is also supported by the Republican Party of Giorgio La Malfa, the Italian politician closest to the Trilateral Commission.

If this option now has some strength, this is due to the disrupting effects Cossiga and the North League had on the Italian political system, by fully exploiting in a demagogic way the existing corruption of the system. Cossiga started off his series of "utterings" with an attack on the Lombard League, but ended up as an ally of this new party.

It is worth underlining a couple of features of this new party. The day he entered the Parliament, Umberto Bossi, the boss of the Lombard League, declared his faith in the "free market" with the haughtiness of a medieval knight entering the lists of a tournament.

Not by chance, the Lombard League had been supported



Italy's gadfly, President Franciso Cossiga, meets with President Bush in Washington on April 7, one day after the Italian elections. With his subsequent resignation, Italy's political crisis deepens.

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In a book-length interview published for the election campaign, *Northern Wind: My League, My Life*, Bossi presents himself as a sort of new Henry VIII, who dictates what religions and the "Vatican" (meant as the "Church") should or should not do. "The priests should stay in their churches, preach their sermons, and go out only to do good deeds. But let them not meddle in politics," said Bossi, with a clear attack on the stand in favor of the "unity" of the Catholics in politics (i.e., support for the DC) repeatedly called for by the Italian bishops during the political election campaign. With a clear threat, Bossi says: "Beware, men of the Vatican, if you stay neutral, it's all okay. But if you start again playing the old card of the DC, then we could suggest to many citizens of northern Italy not to look any longer to Rome, not even for religion. But to look to nearby Switzerland, to the highly civilized Protestant countries which believe in God and in Jesus Christ, but do not recognize papal authority."

Speaking of himself, Bossi says, "I am not certain that God exists . . . [but if He exists] He is not the God they told us of in the catechism. He is a God who is everywhere, in the water, in the fire, in the air we breathe." Bossi defines himself as a "sort of pantheist": not precisely the essence of western civilization or of the Italian tradition. But with this kind of attitude, Bossi presents himself as the champion of Darwinian capitalism, against the social policy of the Church.

His adviser, Professor Miglio, in a recent statement on national television, said that this moment represents a unique historical chance to change the old system of power, and that in the moments of great historical changes, violence is inevitable and welcome.