

Summer of Poisons

Maria Rita Latta (August 25, 2010)



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This summer will be remembered in Italy as “the summer of poisons.” Despite the fact that the majority of Italians are on holiday, politics, politicians, journalists, and the media in general are having a really “hot summer.” And “hot” doesn’t necessarily refer to the temperature on the thermometer!

Parliament is closed but even the vacation season could not prevent a political crisis involving the governing party against the opposition. Here in Italy it’s possible to follow the political crisis “within” the Italian government. This has already happened in the past with the center-left government and now it is happening again with the center-right. The “fight” is getting somewhat personal between Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his former ally, the Speaker of the Low Chamber, Gianfranco Fini

and may be seen as the last chapter of Berlusconi's political saga. The two politicians became allied in 1994 when, for the first time since World War II, a right-wing party with origins in the Fascist party was elected. At that time both Fini and Berlusconi considered their alliance as an opportunity to take advantage of a time in which Italy was shaken by the largest political corruption scandal in its history, the so-called Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) case.

After 16 years at Berlusconi's side, on various occasions Gianfranco Fini started to express his disagreement with many government positions, clashing with various ministers and complaining about Berlusconi's authoritarian style, especially his scorn for parliament and his unfailing support for allegedly corrupt government ministers.

The situation came to a head last April when the two pointed and shouted at each other across the stage at a PdL ([Popolo della Libertà](#) [2]) conference while the audience of fellow party activists and journalists watched the scene, incredulous. Since then the relationship between them has inexorably deteriorated with Fini criticizing the attempt by Berlusconi's government to introduce a law (commonly known as Legge Bavaglio) which would impede magistrates from using wiretaps and would send journalists to jail and fine editors who publish information leaked by prosecutors. The bill has not been passed yet, mainly because of strong criticism from the opposition and the internal conflict within Fini's own party. Berlusconi harshly attacked Fini for his resistance, claiming that he should resign his position as Speaker of the Lower Chamber because he has failed in his duty to guarantee impartiality and accusing his supporters in the PdL of betraying voters.

The turning point in the deteriorating relationship between Berlusconi and Fini came with the creation of a new parliamentary group in the lower house, "[Futuro e Libertà](#) [3]" (Future and Freedom), formed by 33 members of parliament, enough to undermine the government's majority. Fini stated that the new group would be faithful to PdL and would only vote against the government in the case of clear infringement on the commonly agreed upon electoral manifesto. But what Fini really meant was that from then on Berlusconi had to seek his approval for any decree or law that the government planned to introduce.

This new situation became clear on August 4 when the Lower Chamber was called to vote for legal authorization to indict Giacomo Caliendo, a junior minister who was accused of being involved in the creation of a secret society (named P3 by the media, referring to the infamous Masonic Lodge P2), which supposedly plotted to fix judicial and political appointments, discredit Berlusconi's political opponents, and smooth out judges who were to rule on cases involving the Premier. The lower house voted 299 to 229 in the government's favor but there were 75 abstentions, including most of Fini's rebels. It was clear that had they chosen to vote against the government, they would have defeated the bill.

After this event, the hot story of the Italian summer was "casually" stirred up by [Il Giornale](#) [4], a daily owned by Berlusconi's brother, Paolo. With suspect timing, it came out that an apartment in Monte Carlo left as an inheritance by an Italian noblewoman to Fini's party was sold at a knockdown price to an offshore company which then rented the flat to the brother of his fiancée, Elisabetta Tulliani. It's a muddled story, with many questions left unanswered.

Paradoxically, the apparently never-ending controversies involving Fini and Berlusconi have passed from the Lower Chamber to a private chamber in Monte Carlo!

Italians have been informed by [Il Giornale](#) on a daily basis, and with an echo-like effect all of the media outlets, which at this time of year are usually covering celebrity gossip and fresh recipes, are now reporting on an infamous apartment and the Tulliani family. They became, in the mind of a gifted journalist very adept at free association, "The Tullianos" – the Italian version of the Sopranos!

And every day each episode of the Italian mini-series delivers a surprise. Some interviews with Monte Carlo residents apparently indicated that Fini and his partner Elisabetta Tulliani have stayed at the apartment. This goes against Fini's statement that he had no idea about what had happened to the flat. Furthermore, Fini offered an eight-point explanation of the deal, denying accusations of



inappropriate behavior and claiming that he had only recently learned that Elisabetta Tulliani's brother was living in the flat. In the meantime, Il Giornale has started collecting readers' signatures calling for Fini's resignation and exhibited proof, according to the newspaper, that Fini bought furniture for the flat and was seen there on more than one occasion. The Speaker replied that the accusations are defamatory and has sued for libel.

In particular, Il Giornale focused on a kitchen that, according to the newspaper, had been transported to Monte Carlo. What a surprise for the average reader of supposedly "serious" journalism to find photos of kitchens and comments about the "cheap" choice within the first few pages of the most important Italian newspaper. It was not uncommon to find families under the sun on Italian beaches and in vacation resorts commenting on the good or bad taste regarding the furnishings in an apartment owned by Fini and the "Tullianos."

And the saga continues, on the one hand depicting Berlusconi in a few summer photos as plump with a tense and angry expression. This is in direct contrast to the usual photos of Berlusconi on vacation appearing relaxed, tanned, and smiling. On the other there is Fini, once widely expected to become Berlusconi's political heir, but who now runs the risk of being ousted from the so-called "House of Freedom" represented by Berlusconi's party. Fini is not so lucky when it comes to "houses!"

There is also the threat that if the political chaos intensifies, there could be another round of elections. If this is the case, there is a real possibility that the fight between the two contenders may end with the victory of a third, which could very likely be Lega Nord, a party aligned with Berlusconi but one that is looking for more power especially in the northern part of the country. The outsider is the opposition, mainly represented by the Democratic Party which, thanks to internal government fighting, is helping to shift attention from away the crisis and the lack of brilliant ideas to promote itself as a real alternative to Silvio Berlusconi.

One suggestion, made by the Segretario Pierluigi Bersani, seems to be another summer joke: re-launch the party through a door-to-door campaign, literally knocking on each family's door.

For now, the only thing that's clear is that the summer of 2010 summer will be remembered as the summer of houses....

Edited by Giulia Prestia

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