

Italy's Elections: Viagra for the Doldrums?

Judith Harris (April 06, 2008)



Italy faces a serious migraine headache. Experts are already predicting a frustrated and frustrating new legislature with a brief shelf life.

ROME, April 4, 2008 - Unlike America's, Italy's national general election campaign is blissfully short, and so, called barely two months ago, the end approaches with the vote April 13-14. Otherwise, to borrow from our favorite cashmere Communist Fausto Bertinotti, this is the lousiest election campaign in memory.

The front-runner remains the ultraconservative media magnate and aging roué Silvio Berlusconi (right), once and future premier, who has been on trial for corruption more frequently than most Mafiosi. Even his enemies figure that he will prevail, and this has meant during the campaign that his arrogance has expanded, both shocking and amusing even his most charitable admirers.



A week ago he boasted that the influential Cardinal Camillo Ruini hopes no one will vote for the new Democratic party of Berlusconi's opponent, former Rome Mayor Walter Veltroni. Truly or otherwise, the sometime political meddler cardinal primly retorted that the Church supported no one. Meantime, the rallies of the sassy fattie Giuliano Ferrara, who is running an anti-abortion list of candidates, are being broken up by police as feminists rally.

Berlusconi's allies and advisers, including xenophobic demagogue Umberto Bossi of the Northern League, who is much recovered from the stroke of a few years back, warned Berlusconi to stay off the subject of women, but he could not resist. Ever the feminist, Berlusconi told a group of women last week that they are the bosses "within the walls of the home", that they are superior to men in having "instincts" (not in reasoning, mind), that he bows to his own women when he is safely near the hearth—and then he ardently hugged a lissome blond admirer, as is his wont.

Earlier, Berlusconi had advised a young woman, who complained that she could not find a job, to get married, since she was cute, "maybe to one of my sons." And in Palermo he has just reminded Mafiosi they are not to vote for him, "just as I said last time." (He scored 58% in Sicily.)

My favorite election cartoon was on the front cover of a L'Unità satirical insert, otherwise undistinguished. It depicts Berlusconi inside a drugstore handing the pharmacist a prescription: Pharmacist: The usual Viagra for you? Berlusconi: Not just for me - it's for all of Italy.

In the cartoonist's imagination, the best the self-styled Freedom Party (Partito della Libertà, or PDL) can do is to offer, well, self-help for individual indulgence. Like politicians everywhere, Berlusconi tends to say the outrageous one day and explain the next that the media took his words out of context. In any case, what Berlusconi and, with him, the nation may need most in the post-election future will be not Viagra, but a headache powder. For a number of giant headaches are arriving thick and fast.

The biggest is Alitalia, the debt-ridden flagship airline that is losing one million Euros daily (about \$1.4 million). Berlusconi's undermining of the Prodi government's plan to have the semi-privatized Alitalia absorbed by Air France is mischievous, not to say downright evil. A condition for the takeover is the sacking of 2,100 employees, a project which the unions noisily oppose, even at risk of the company's going bankrupt within days, with the loss of all jobs. Berlusconi, the economic libertarian, is playing to and with the unions, for once, and has proposed that a consortium of private businessmen, including his own two sons, just might take over Alitalia in order to save national pride. Shareholders objected, and last week Alitalia stock slumped by 37% in a day. Today, as the Air France takeover may fade, Alitalia stock is virtually worthless, even as air "hostesses", as the Italian press still calls stewards, were demonstrating against the unions, who are demonstrating, with Berlusconi's blessing, against the outgoing government of Romano Prodi.

Should Berlusconi win the elections, he vows to boycott the Air France proposal. This suggests that the incoming government would have to help bail out Alitalia, before it can be sold at a handy discount (to wit, that worthless stock) to Berlusconi's sons & co.

So will he win? All the polls concur that Berlusconi remains well ahead, but even here there are problems. Many Italians decline to reply to pollsters, and those willing to answer questions on the phone tend to be older and female—those who already back Berlusconi, that is. This skewing of the polls is aggravated by the fact that pollsters here contact Gianfranco_fini almost only those who still have land line phones, and therefore ignore the youth vote, tipped to favor both Veltroni on the left and Berlusconi's rival on the right and possible successor, the "post-fascist" Gianfranco Fin.



Predictions therefore are that, when the real vote is counted in mid-April, Berlusconi will prevail in the Chamber, but face the same sort of narrow win in the Senate which became a statement that worked against outgoing center-left Premier Prodi.

Curiously, Berlusconi has similar troubles with his TV networks. On the face of it the Auditel measurements network audiences show he has a huge market share, but behind the TV sets and Fifties programming of men who put on fake boobs as entertainment there's another story. Berlusconi's trio of networks especially attract the elderly and intellectually challenged, and these "folks" living on minimal pensions do not buy the products advertised; in advertising terms this is a phony audience. Proof of the advertisers' canny analysis of the needs of the elder-market, morning radio audiences for RAI, the national network, are treated to a veritable flush of ads offering cures for constipation and Bolshie bladders.

The biggest headache of all may well be the newly revived Bossi, whose anti-immigration Northern League is likely to hold the parcel of votes crucial to Senate votes. And this just may mean a serious migraine headache for the entire nation. Given such a shortage of political Viagra, experts here are already predicting a frustrated and frustrating new legislature with a brief shelf life.

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