

"Italians Are Better Than This"

George De Stefano (October 20, 2008)



Italy's only black member of Parliament this week denounced the government for inciting xenophobia and racism

"I think maybe you Americans should come and liberate us again," Giovanni wrote in an e-mail exchange the other day.



Giovanni, a Sicilian university professor and a longtime friend of mine and my partner Rob's, is thoroughly disgusted with his nation's leader, Silvio Berlusconi, and the premier's right-wing government, an unappetizing mélange of neo-Fascists, Vatican groupies, and racists.

It's the racists and xenophobes Giovanni was particularly angry about during an online chat. Some of them, he told us, now are proposing separate school classrooms for the children of immigrants.

"But of course these would be equal," he sarcastically remarked, deliberately referencing the "separate but equal" ideology of old-line American segregationists.

Giovanni, like many decent Italians, looks at the United States, which appears ready to elect a black president, and is ashamed of his country. That's why he joked about American troops liberating Italy once again, as they did during World War II.

It's no secret that racist and anti-immigrant sentiment is growing in Italy. Italian, European, and international media have been reporting a rising tide of intolerance since Berlusconi and company came to power earlier this year.

It increasingly takes the form of physical attacks on people of color, even murder. Last month in Milan, a nineteen year old African immigrant named Abdul William Guibre was beaten to death by the owner of a bar and his son, who accused the youth of stealing some biscotti. The father and son called Guibre a "filthy black" and attacked him with a metal pole.

Also in Milan, a Senegalese handbag vendor was beaten with a baseball bat after other merchants accused him of taking work away from native Italians. In camorra-infested Casal di Principe, outside Naples, gangsters shot to death six African immigrants. In Rome, Italian youths, mainly minors, beat up a Chinese immigrant.

A Somali woman claimed that she was strip-searched and verbally abused while going through customs at Rome's Ciampino airport. In this case the government responded quickly – Interior Minister Roberto Maroni said he would personally sue the woman for lying. Right-wing Senator Maurizio Gasparri chimed in, saying, "Between her version and that of the police I would have no doubt about believing the police."

This week Italy's only black parliamentarian denounced the increasing intolerance. "Immigrants are becoming the enemy," said Jean-Léonard Touadi, in an interview with The Guardian.

Born in the Congo, Touadi, 49, was raised in France and immigrated to Italy in 1979. He rose to prominence as a television journalist, and later served as a deputy mayor in the administration of Rome's ex-mayor Walter Veltroni. In 2008, he was elected to the Italian Parliament from Lazio as second on the list of Antonio Di Pietro's Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values) party. He is Italy's third black MP and the first MP from sub-Saharan Africa.

"With an economic crisis under way, Italy has found a scapegoat to blame its woes on," Touadi said.

He accuses the Northern League, the party of Interior Minister Maroni, of stoking the fires of bigotry.

"The League is pushing discrimination, separation and xenophobia and dragging the government, and with it Italy, towards the systematic violation of human rights," he said. The League has called for the expulsion of legal immigrants who commit offenses, restrictions on mixed marriages, and a requirement that doctors report patients who are undocumented immigrants.

"For the League, the real problem is not illegal immigration, it's immigration," Touadi observed. "They need to stop while there is still time."

"We've seen Rome taxi drivers chanting 'Duce, Duce' at the town hall when the new right-wing mayor [Gianni Alemanno] was elected this year and now fans with swastikas are following the national football team," Touadi said. "Italy will need millions of immigrants to maintain its workforce if birth rates continue to be low and entire sectors of the economy, like hotels and agriculture, would



go under now without them, but the government prefers demagoguery."

Touadi argues that Italians, by succumbing to their leaders' fear-mongering, are betraying their own best qualities. "Italians are better than this," he said, "starting from the Catholic tradition of giving support, to the constitution, which emerged from fascism to focus on individual rights, to Italy's own history of emigration."

Though Touadi says the government has been cynically exploiting fears of immigrants as job-stealers and criminals, he does not deny that some immigrants do commit crimes. "There has been an increase in crime by immigrants - to ignore that would be false political correctness," he noted. "But how can the government focus only on them when four regions in southern Italy are controlled by the mafia?"

Touadi saw signs of hope in the recent protests in Milan over the killing of Guibre. Italian-born sons and daughters of immigrants, of various ethnic and religious backgrounds, came together to express their outrage.

"They will now look for a political role," Touadi said. "Their voice enriches Italian culture."

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