

## Sliding into insecurity



Over the last four years, decades of social achievements have been lost due to structural reforms and privatisation, benefiting a small proportion of the population. There is a clear decline in the quality of life together with an increase in inequalities (through the re-establishment of privileges for the few). Insecurity is growing, favoured by a government that shows increasing disdain for democratic rules, institutional and social dialogue, and the civil rights of those who are (politically, socially or culturally) “different”.

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Over the last four years Italy has been steadily sliding down the ranking in the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index: in 2000 the country ranked 19th in the world, by 2002 it had dropped to 20th and in 2003 it came 21st.

In the Human Poverty Index, Italy remains in 11th place, with no progress since last year. The Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT, National Institute of Statistics) has revealed that “there were 2.46 million Italian households living in relative poverty in 2002, a figure representing 11% of all households. Absolute poverty affects 926,000 households, that is 4.2% of the total”.<sup>1</sup>

Italy also went down a place, from 20th to 21st, in the Gender-related Human Development Index, while - perhaps an even more alarming trend - the country dropped from 31st to 32nd place in the Gender Empowerment Measure. The latter takes into consideration women’s participation in political and economic life, and the distribution of wealth by sex.

Insecurity is growing in the country, favoured by the attitude of a government that shows increasing disdain for democratic rules, institutional and social dialogue, and the civil rights of those who are (politically, socially or culturally) “different”.

### Institutional (in)security

The first element of insecurity derives from the bizarre fact that the Head of Government, Silvio Berlusconi, is at the same time the richest man in the country and controls around 75% of the media in general and 90% of national broadcasting. Although media monopolies are common in European countries, the Italian case is more worrying due to the direct and indirect control Berlusconi and his

company-party exert over the private and state media sectors. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s representative for media freedom, Freimut Duve, has declared that “this form of media control is clearly unconstitutional”. In short, the current trend in politics in Italy is characterised by strong media influence with a consequent risk of populism.

It is worth remembering the alarmed tones of international press reports when commenting the start of the Italian Presidency of the European Union, in July 2003. The UK newspaper Financial Times referred to an “untouchable President for Europe”, the German magazine Der Spiegel invoked the EU Treaty which foresees a procedure to sanction a member State which violates some of the EU basic principles, such as the freedom of the press or the fundamentals of the States regulated by “right-based” principles, and the UK magazine The Economist said he was “not fit to lead the government of any country”.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, some of the measures taken by the Government in 2003 are a cause for further alarm, such as the so-called Gasparri Law, that in practice grants the Prime Minister a yet greater concentration of the media in his hands. The Gasparri Law (named after the Minister of Communication) seeks to enlarge the advertising budget through the Integrated System of Communications by making it impossible to fix a ceiling to the amount of income a single telecommunications group can earn from advertising.

Mediaset - Berlusconi’s company - is already in a dominant position (controlling 63%), limiting access to the market and new media groups’ opportunities for growth. The new law de facto eliminates the conflict of interests by broadening the limits: for example, television channels, newspapers and broadcasting are grouped together with telecommunications, satellite systems, etc., so that Mediaset appears to have a smaller share of the whole. On the other hand, the pay-TV market is monopolised by another media giant - Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. As Secretary-General of the International Federation of Journalists Aidan

White has recently declared, “Italy is about to become one of the most concentrated media markets in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

### Social (in)security

The Government’s plan of action is clear: to progressively shift responsibility for public services to the market and charities, thus reducing social spending and supporting the private sector. Modest welfarist measures have been introduced while cutting funds for local authorities to spend on social policies. This is a clear attack on the welfare state: the gates are being opened to the market and private companies. In return, Italians are promised a cut in taxes so that they will have more money to spend on the private market. However, 64% of citizens would prefer to pay more taxes for improved public services.

In the meantime, government policies on employment, social security and immigration (like reducing the average length of contracts, creating uncertainty regarding the age and quality of retirement, treatment of immigrants) contribute to an increasing sense of insecurity in the country. This is exacerbated by the fact that the mainstream media - especially the national broadcasting networks - turns every news item into a criminal case threatening “our lifestyle”. This is especially true in the case of immigration. The year 2003 has been strongly marked by the enforcement of the new Act 189/2002, known as the Bossi-Fini Law, which clamps down on “illegal immigration”. In fact, the only option open to the majority of the 2.5 million immigrants was to enter Italy illegally and take advantage of subsequent amnesties.

In response to pressure from entrepreneurs, who benefit from larger migratory flows, the Government takes measures to hamper people’s freedom of circulation, weakening their legal status, hindering the process of social integration and effectively giving employers power over immigrants’ right of residence; at the same time, the Government stirs up social fears regarding foreign citizens by portraying them as criminals. The result - actively sought by the Government - is the limitation of foreign workers’ rights. In fact, when combined with

1 Istat Report 2003. [www.istat.it](http://www.istat.it)

2 *The Economist*. [www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=593654](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=593654)

3 International Federation of Journalists. [www.ifj-europe.org](http://www.ifj-europe.org)

the measures introduced by the new Law No 30 (known as the Biagi Law), also passed in 2003, the rights of all workers are undermined.

Alongside the progressive dismantling of the welfare state, there has been an exponential growth in the number of people in prisons in recent years. At 31 December 2002, the prison population numbered about 57,000 plus another 35,000 serving non-custodial sentences and on probation, while 70,000 people were awaiting the Court's decision on non-custodial sentences. If we add to these figures people under house arrest, under electronic bracelet surveillance or subject to restrictive orders, the result is over 200,000 convicted criminals. The country therefore has a high detention rate: 100 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. Italian jails hold about 16,000 more people than the available bed spaces.

A review of the legal and socio-economic characteristics of the prison population shows that about one-third of them are non-European citizens, half of whom come from Islamic countries; one-third are people with drug and alcohol addiction problems; 16,000 people were unemployed before their arrest, 22,000 have not completed compulsory education, and over 17,000 are under 30 years old. Thus it is also clear that in Italy penal policies are tending to be used to deal with problems traditionally covered by social policies.

### **Economic (in)security**

In 2003 the launch of a book entitled "The Disappearance of Industrial Italy"<sup>4</sup> coincided with the explosion of the Fiat crisis which presaged the crash of two major Italian food corporations, Cirio and Parmalat (the latter is perhaps the biggest in European history). These cases illustrate several dimensions of the profound crisis affecting the industrial sector and the economy as a whole. They relate to the production system, but also to government corruption and fraud against small investors and institutions. The Italian economy is going through a structural crisis concerning competitiveness, management and - it is now clear - legality.

Nowadays, finance is no longer a tool at the service of the real economy, but rather has an end in itself: in 2003, banks were responsible for 50% of mergers and acquisitions in Italy; these banks also support shady businesses since they are involved in their capital and investments (as in the cases of Parmalat and Cirio).

At the same time, the advertising market is shrinking, but the broadcasting sector's share has increased, and now accounts for almost 60% of the total. This trend has taken place under the control and to the benefit of Prime Minister Berlusconi. According to Forbes he is the 35th wealthiest person in the world, with personal assets worth EUR 7.2 billion (USD 8.77 billion): he owns shares val-

ued at EUR 7.3 billion (USD 8.89 billion) on the Italian stock market and has declared an annual income of EUR 9 million (USD 10.96 million).

The Prime Minister has reacted to the current economic situation by proposing tax amnesties and remissions in favour of those who infringe building regulations, attacking the state social security system, creating a more precarious labour market, transferring the education system to the private sector, reducing taxes on large private assets, selling off public assets below cost and dismantling the state university and research sector. The message to the citizenry is unequivocal: it pays to be sly. It is exactly the opposite of what is needed in a country immersed in a productive and entrepreneurial identity crisis.

### **Environmental (in)security**

In Italy environmental policies have never been brilliant, but they have rarely gone through such a dire phase: proper funds for the enforcement of the Kyoto Protocol have yet to be allocated, while gas and oil consumption as well as road haulage are still given preferential treatment. At the same time, fewer funds are being allocated to protect the sea and the environment (funds to manage waters in Venice, for instance, were cut by 70%).

Furthermore, the Government has declared a new amnesty in favour of those who infringe building regulations (the third in 19 years). Thanks to this measure, the State has lost yet more credibility: ordinary people will be tempted to break the rules and wait for the next amnesty. For the first time it will be possible to regularise infringements committed on property owned by the State: beaches or archaeological sites on which villas, restaurants and cafés have been built will suddenly attain legal status.

Based on the fact that 362,000 illegal new buildings were erected between 1994 and 2002 - with the total costs of attendant urban development being covered by local authorities in the sum of EUR 8.7 billion (USD 10.8 billion) - projections indicate that this amnesty will increase the rate of future infringements up to 44%, which means that in 2004 alone 60,000 new illegal buildings will be built, which for the most part will spoil the environment.

### **International (in)security**

For 2004, the Government allocated EUR 1.2 billion (USD 1.48 billion) to cover the costs of Italian participation in the occupation of Iraq. This allocation represents more than a 5% increase in military expenditure, which had already grown over 10% in the last four years. The military budget (missions and the ministry budget) is the only one that will increase in a year of cuts and constraints.

In the meantime, funding for international co-operation faces a deep crisis. This is mainly due to the inadequacy of Law 49/87 that regulates Italy's commitment with respect to international co-operation, and to the progressive decline of the Directorate General for Development Co-operation at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (which today is almost

paralysed). This Board does not even guarantee basic administrative work that would at least contribute to maintaining the projects already underway.

During 2003, the Executive Committee (the Directorate's operational and decision-making body) did not meet for months on end, while hundreds of projects were waiting to be processed and selected. Besides, Italian NGOs had spent as much as EUR 30 million (USD 36.5 million) on projects that had already been accepted: some NGOs are still waiting for funds granted in 1997.

There is an acute shortage of funding: only 0.2% of gross national income (GNI) was allocated to international co-operation in 2002, making Italy the penultimate country in terms of resource destination on the list of OECD countries. This situation belies the high-sounding declarations made by Prime Minister Berlusconi on several occasions, promising to raise this figure to 0.7% of GNI.

### **Signs of an awakening**

In this context, we must acknowledge that there are signs of an awakening among civil society, which on many occasions has maintained a high level of mobilisation and awareness. Initiatives which deserve a mention include those taken by the *Girotondi* movement in defence of media pluralism and the independence of the judiciary, those taken by trade unions in support of the state school system, state pension schemes and labour rights, and last but not least, the campaigns in favour of setting new priorities in public expenditure, and in defence of the common goods. These types of initiatives are expected to grow, fomenting civic commitment and challenging political powers and institutions. ■

4 Gallino, Luciano. *La scomparsa dell'Italia industriale*. Einaudi, July 2003.