

Italy gets tough on crime but neglects corruption

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Silvio Berlusconi, billionaire media magnate and three-time prime minister, swept back into power this spring by brilliantly capturing the mood of the country, namely a prevailing sense of insecurity among Italians over their economic and physical well-being.

True to his campaign promise, the army yesterday put 3,000 soldiers on urban crime patrols and a national emergency has been declared to deal with the hundreds of mostly African immigrants floating their way from Libya to Italy's shores. A "census" and the finger-printing of foreign Gypsies have begun. Many are to be expelled.

Given Mr Berlusconi's mastery of the media, his leftwing rivals accuse him of fuelling the sense of fear that he offers to assuage. Ministers in the previous centre-left government felt constantly undermined by negative reporting that played up savage crimes allegedly committed by foreigners - notably the case of a naval officer's wife whose grisly murder became a campaign theme in the election of Rome's first rightwing mayor since Fascist times.

Although comparative statistics are notoriously tricky, United Nations and European Union studies indicate that Italy's crime rates are below the European average. Romans might be surprised to find they are safer than residents of London, Copenhagen or Amsterdam. But, as every politician knows, it is perception that counts. Assertions by the defeated coalition that crime was declining fell on deaf ears. As Eurispes, a research institute, noted in its 2008 Italy report, levels of anxiety did not track the falling trend.

Curiously - given the frenzy that has dominated public discourse - some outside surveys indicate that Italians feel less worried about their security than many other Europeans. Unisys, an

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information technology company, publishes a twice-yearly security index. In March, at the height of the election campaign, Italians scored a little-changed and moderate 94 on four counts of the perception of their national, financial, internet and personal security. This compared with 117 in the UK, which was credited with an "unflappability and phlegmatic response to provocation" despite terrorist attacks and the bursting of the housing bubble. At the two extremes it was the Germans (165) who came across as acutely angst-ridden, and the French (76) who showed the most *sang-froid*.

Although Italy compares well with its European peers in terms of violent crime, evidence suggests that on corruption it is among the worst offenders. Italy ranks 40th on Transparency International's global corruption index. Only Greece comes lower in the EU-15. The World Bank's aggregation of various indices gives Italy a percentile rank of 71, slightly above South Korea but far below its main European peers.

Fighting corruption did not figure highly in Italy's elections. On this front the two most noteworthy acts of the Berlusconi government's first months in office have been to pass a law giving the prime minister and three other top officials immunity from prosecution, and to dissolve the office of the high commissioner against corruption. Mr Berlusconi, temporarily freed from a corruption trial, declared that "finally the magistrates can no longer persecute me and I can spend Saturdays working on policies instead of talking with my lawyers".

Instead, Drago Kos, head of Greco, the group of states against corruption established by the Council of Europe, warned that Italy was "about to move back to a situation where there is no real political will to fight corruption".

The government strongly denies this. It says the semi-independent anti-corruption commission was inefficient and small and its work will be absorbed by other ministries.

Critics wonder, however, whether the public administration ministry is best placed to combat corruption in the public administration. They also note that its probes into the state health sector - a main source of income for Mafia groups - had earned it powerful enemies. In Calabria, probably the most corrupt region of all, the tough (and leftwing) anti-mafia prosecutor, Salvatore Boemi, has been demoted. Two of his investigations involved national senators from the ruling coalition.

This is not to suggest that corruption is the sole domain of the centre-right. Two legal cases involve the heads of leftwing regional governments in Abruzzo and Campania who are accused of corruption in the health sector and awarding waste management contracts respectively. Both men deny the charges. In these cases the government says justice should run its course.

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