

# With the ring-a-ring o' roses, democracy is falling down

By Dominic Standish  
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**A** *girotondo*, the Italian version of the children's song and game "ring-a-ring o' roses," was performed on Oct. 11 to challenge the Cirami, or trial transfer bill.

The Cirami legislation now faces the formality of a Senate vote. It will allow defendants to request moving trials and restarting proceedings where there is "legitimate suspicion," as the official phrase goes, of courtroom bias. This is likely to mean the prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, and his former lawyer, Cesare Previti, will escape convictions for alleged bribes to judges.

But is the *girotondo* movement strong enough to challenge the government? On Sept. 14, protesters — estimated at between 180,000 and 700,000, according to the sources — overcrowded Rome's Piazza San Giovanni for a demonstration against the trial transfer bill.

Whatever the precise numbers, some claimed that this event heralded a new kind of movement.

"A multitude of this size has never been seen for a spontaneous demonstration without a structured organization backing it," wrote Eugenio Scalfari in *La Repubblica* daily. The Veneto's *Il Gazzettino* noted that although 30 coaches went from the Northeast to Rome, most people traveled independently. This is unusual in Italy, where demonstrations are usually tightly organized by political parties.

This movement of *girotondisti* started forming circles by holding hands at the beginning of 2002. Since then, *girotondi* have been held by unemployed workers in Naples, around the headquarters of state broadcaster RAI, by 7,000 protesters outside the Senate and by demonstrators for better immigrant accommodation in Treviso.

When I spoke with demonstrators in Rome on Sept. 14, they had wider concerns than the judicial reform, including Article 18, or the employee firing reform, and possible support for an attack on Iraq.

The inspiration behind the *girotondo* movement, film director Nanni Moretti, has attempted to broaden the focus of the movement beyond the Cirami

reforms.

While Moretti is good at criticizing politicians from the government and opposition coalition, what exactly is he for? During his speech to the crowd on Sept. 14, I heard Moretti attacking many government policies, but he put forward no real proposals.

Moretti and the *girotondo* movement are not for anything because they are not a political movement as it has been understood in the past. Traditionally, politics has given representation to a contest over interests, expressed as what parties are for and against. But Moretti is explicitly rejecting politics.

Indeed, Moretti has rebuffed suggestions that he become an opposition coalition leader. The former leader of the CGIL union, Sergio Cofferati, has so far adopted a similar position in relation to calls he should help revive the ailing opposition alliance. After Cofferati resigned as the leader of Italy's most militant union, he returned to his old job at cable and tire maker Pirelli.

Perhaps both Moretti and Cofferati sense their appeal as untainted by the world of professional politics, largely discredited since the 1992 Tangentopoli corruption scandals that led to the collapse of the Socialist and Christian Democratic parties.

People doing other jobs alongside politics, like Moretti and Cofferati, are the kind of model citizens that can challenge professional politicians, according to Paolo Flores D'Arcais. Considered an ideologue for the *girotondo* movement, Flores D'Arcais is the editor of the journal *MicroMega*. In a recent issue focusing on the *girotondi*, he embraced "the simple active citizen, that same one who engages in politics only in his spare time, but whose decisions are as important as those of full time politicians."

But can it be democratic that unelected citizens have the same power as those given a mandate at the ballot box?

The *girotondo* movement's leaders have rejected calls to launch a new political party. The movement failed to create sufficient pressure to prevent the Chamber of Deputies from passing the Cirami bill on Oct. 10. The next day, the *girotondisti* encircled the presidential palace, the Quirinale, calling on the

unelected president not to convert this democratically approved bill into law.

With the *girotondisti* unwilling to launch an opposition political party, is the current coalition of opposition parties able to defeat the government? The opposition parties' difficulties in challenging the Cirami reforms in both houses of Parliament are the consequence of the low number of votes they received in the 2001 general election. The participation of opposition parties in the *girotondi* outside the institutions of Italian democracy reveals their democratic weakness within those bodies.

Artists and journalists speaking against Berlusconi's government for the Rome demonstration on Sept. 14 joined Moretti on the stage. Absent from the platform were any politicians. The organizers had invited politicians from all parties to attend. This may appear to be very democratic. But they simultaneously denied free speech by banning any politicians from speaking on the stage to the crowd. The opposition coalition leader, Francesco Rutelli, and the Democratic Left leader, Piero Fassino, attended the demonstration, but did not speak from the platform.

The *girotondo* represents the demise of democratic politics within the government's opposition. Playing at politics seems to be the best they can do to challenge a very undemocratic government.

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