

The forgotten separatist movement in Sardinia



Many Sardinians felt they were being neglected and given low priority by the government in Rome. Photo: bikemap.net

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While the separatist movement in Catalonia has remained the focus of international attention in recent months, secessionist movements in other parts of Europe have largely gone under the radar of the international community.

Among them is the bid for independence of the people of Sardinia.

In late August this year, The Times of London ran an obituary on Salvatore Meloni, a Sardinian separatist who landed on a tiny island off Sardinia in 2005 and proclaimed himself “president”, and was later arrested by the

Italian authorities for allegedly launching bomb attacks.

Meloni died in hospital in July after a two-month hunger strike in prison.

At first glance, his action seems nothing more than a farce. But his desperate acts highlighted a political reality: Sardinians have their own unique sense of national identity as opposed to the rest of Italians.

Sardinia used to be a dominion of the Kingdom of Aragon in Spain. However, the island was ceded to the Duke of Savoy in 1720 in the wake of the Spanish War of Succession, who then went on to unify the entire Italy in the 19th century. As a result, Sardinia became part of the newly unified Italy.

But although it officially became part of Italy, Sardinia was nothing more than a remote and sparsely populated island that was superfluous in the eyes of both the ruling House of Savoy as well as mainstream Italian elites. At one point, Rome even seriously considered selling Sardinia to either Austria or France.

Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the founding fathers of modern Italy, once said he was more than happy to trade Sardinia for France's support for the unification of the Italian peninsula.

And since it was considered a "fifth wheel" by Rome, Sardinia remained an under-governed, under-funded and under-developed region within Italy.

Dismayed at being ignored by the central authorities, the Sardinian aristocracy voiced their discontent and demanded modern reforms in 1847, only to find themselves once again shrugged off by the mainland Italians.

Worse still, as Italy underwent sweeping democratization after the Second World War, the Sardinians found that they were even more neglected and given lower priority than before by the democratic government in Rome,

thereby fueling separatist sentiments among them.

During the post-war years, the Sardinian separatist movement was mainly spearheaded by two indigenous political groups, the Sardinian Action Party (Partito Sardo d'Azione) and the Sardinian Democratic Union (Unione Democratica Sarda).

The political influence of the Sardinian Action Party reached its peak after the local election in 1984, in which the party succeeded in snapping 13.8 percent of the vote, and was given the power to nominate the head of the local administration of Sardinia.

Unfortunately, since then the Sardinian nationalist movement has begun to lose momentum, thanks to the intense infighting among the leading separatist groups.

As a result, some “lone wolf” Sardinian nationalists like Salvatore Meloni, who were once members of these political parties, but who were frustrated and disaffected with their inaction, began to take it upon themselves to pursue the nationalist cause.

Apart from having their own unique sense of identity, the Sardinians also have a lot of other legitimate grievances against Rome. For example, 60 percent of the NATO troops deployed to Italy are currently stationed in Sardinia, which are considered by many Sardinians as nuisance.

Also, the influx of mainland Italian companies into Sardinia over the years has been regarded by many local Sardinians as a threat to their livelihood.

In 2012, the Sardinian legislature moved a motion proposing to hold a referendum on whether to secede from Italy, yet the motion was dramatically defeated by just one vote.

When Meloni died, his funeral was only attended by family members and some Venetian separatists, suggesting that his extreme acts had failed to gain approval from most of his fellow Sardinians.

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