

Lampedusa: Immigration, the Law, Recriminations

Judith Harris (October 06, 2013)



Even as Italian fire fighters brought up more bodies this morning from the moral as well as physical abyss off the isle of Lampedusa, a battle over the Italian law governing immigration rages. Of the over 500 known to have been aboard the ship that burned early Thursday, 143 bodies were recovered while another 220, and possibly more, have been identified inside the sunken ship today. This latest tragedy means that Italy's harsh immigration law is under severe scrutiny.

ROME - Even as Italian fire fighters brought up more bodies this morning from the moral as well as physical abyss off the isle of Lampedusa, a battle over the Italian law governing immigration rages. At this writing, of the well over 500 known to have been aboard the ship that burned early Thursday morning, 143 bodies were recovered while another 220, and possibly more, have been identified



inside the sunken ship today. More recoveries are expected. In a change from the migrations of a decade ago, almost half of the corpses found were of women, one of them pregnant, while the bodies of dead babies and children were found afloat only a short distance from what is considered one of the most beautiful shorelines in the Mediterranean.

Less than 8 square miles in size, the island bears the brunt of migration into Europe because it lies physically closer to North Africa, with Tunisia just 70 miles distant, than to Europe; Sicily (Lampedusa falls within the province of Agrigento) is farther, at 109 miles away. Most of the migrants who have been descending upon the island over the past decade come from Africa, but not all. The burnt boat held many of these, but also a contingent of those escaping the violence of Syria. And from what the 155 survivors were able to tell their Italian rescuers, like the Syrians aboard, the Africans too were escaping from the violence in the countries from which they had fled, Somalia and Eritrea. These were not, in other words, the men defined as "economic migrants," but refugees. The distinction is important because of the legal status of the survivors.

Italy's legislation on immigration, known as the Bossi-Fini law, was passed in 2002 by the Silvio Berlusconi government in coalition with the ultra-nationalist Northern League, then headed by the cantankerous Umberto Bossi. Highly controversial, the law was promoted by Bossi himself together with Gianfranco Fini, a reformed former neo-Fascist. The law was immediately branded as Fascist but has remained on the books. Its provisions, including amendments of 2009:

- to remain, an immigrant must show possession of a work visa and contract for at least one year submitted by an employer;
- illegal immigrants risk a fine of \$14,200 and can be detained for more than six months;
- because illegal immigration is a crime, public officials and public workers must report the presence of any illegal immigrant;
- those housing undocumented migrants risk three years in prison;
- unarmed citizen patrols can circulate so as to help police;
- all illegal or irregular immigrants found by police on Italia soil must be identified and deported to their countries of origin.

A particularly grievous provision is that the owners of those private boats helping in rescues at sea can be accused of aiding and abetting clandestine migrants; rescues are up to public agencies like the firemen and Carabinieri. Although some say this is not necessarily so, it is accepted wisdom by most, and may explain why one or two of the Lampedusa fishing boats did not move forward to help immediately. And by the way, again under the Berlusconi government, in April 2011 his Interior Minister Roberto Maroni, Bossi's second-in-command in the Northern League, issued a ministerial circular which forbade reporters and journalists access to any immigrant detention center. One year later Maroni's successor under the center-left government revoked this appalling and undemocratic measure.

Despite risk of prosecution for helping, most Lampedusa boatmen did rush forward, including hobby fishermen and tourists in small craft. Their descriptions of pulling refugees from the water were harrowing: so much oil had come out of the burning boat that survivors' hands and arms were greasy, and the survivors kept slipping back into the water.

Should this law, aimed at bringing order in the Italian (and especially the North Italian) work place be revised to make a distinction between refugee status and economic migration? "Repression alone will not help," said Laura Boldrini, president of the Chamber of Deputies and an expert on problems of immigration. Most on the center-left agree, angrily, that she is right and that the law must be rewritten. Still, a few close to Premier Letta fear that, given the relative weakness of Alfano within the PdL, it can be risky to push him too hard within his party and make fears of immigrants a new battle cry.

The tragedy is deeply felt throughout all of Italy, but little more so than in tiny Lampedusa, which some in Italy are trying to promote for the Nobel Peace Prize. The voice of the mayor, a woman named Giusi Nicolini, reveals exhaustion. In a facebook comment she wrote only a few minutes ago to thank Minister Cecilia Kyenge "for being with us in this very tough moment." It is scarcely the mayor's first tough moment; on September 2 the town hall had to be evacuated because an envelope containing what was identified as anthrax was sent to her office.



The anguish all this means for the inhabitants of Lampedusa cannot be overstated. To help the island's children digest the drama which continues to unfold in their front yard, elementary school teachers are having the children make drawings of the disaster and the dead.

Post script #1: Former Premier Silvio Berlusconi will elect charitable service rather than house arrest, also because his formal residence is in his Roman apartment rather than in the larger, more comfortable mansion at Arcore near Milan. As a result, Italian charitable associations are fairly begging for him. Interviewed by La Repubblica on what would be the best solution, a priest who has worked for decades with former drug addicts suggested, "Let him plant tomatoes, above all in silence."

Post script #2: After the high tension confidence vote last week guaranteed the continuity of the government headed by Enrico Letta of the Partito Democratico, latest public opinion surveys show that Angelino Alfano's Liberty party (PdL) gained in consensus, moving up from 25% to 29% in just seven days. The increase suggests approval of the fact that the party's hawks were finally shown to be a minority. For the same reason the personal popularity of Berlusconi, blamed by four out of ten for causing the political crisis, sank to 18%, down 3% from the previous week. The same survey showed that Italian President Giorgio Napolitano's popularity bounced up by 6 % in just one week to 54% of those queried, thanks to his contributions in resolving the crisis and avoiding national general elections. Matteo Renzi, with 52%, is Italy's second most popular single political leader. The survey, whose results were released Oct. 4, was conducted by Ixe' for RAI national broadcasting network.

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