

Attacks on immigrants highlight rise of fascist groups in Italy

Antifascists say authorities have no will to stop 'unconstitutional' far-right parties



Lorenzo Tondo in Palermo

Tue 6 Feb 2018 14.06 GMT

More than 70 years after Benito Mussolini's death, thousands of Italians are joining self-described fascist groups in a surge of support that antifascist groups blame on the portrayal of the refugee crisis, the rise of fake news and the country's failure to deal with its past.

The shooting in Macerata on Saturday that left six Africans injured was only the latest in a series of attacks perpetrated by people linked to the extreme right. According to the antifascist organisation Infoantifa Ecn, there have been 142 attacks by neofascist groups since 2014.

As Luca Traini, 28, was questioned over the Macerata shooting, four North Africans in Pavia told police on Sunday that they had been beaten up during the night by a group of 25 skinheads. On 13 January in Naples, dozens of people belonging to the far-right association Forza Nuova broke into a bar where a meeting on Roma culture was being held, causing damage and wounding a female organiser.

In 2001, Forza Nuova had just 1,500 members. Today, it has more than 13,000 and its Facebook page has more than 241,000 followers, almost 20,000 more than the Democratic

party, Italy's biggest leftwing party. The fascist-inspired CasaPound party has almost 234,000 followers. Its secretary, Simone Di Stefano, is running for prime minister in the 4 March general election.

"We grew up on our own, without the help of the media," Adriano Da Pozzo, a Forza Nuova leader, told the Guardian. "The other parties aimed at promoting their candidates, while we aim for the promotion of our ideas." The far-right group has offered legal support to Traini.

Antifascist groups say an apparent reluctance to take action against the far-right groups is allowing their rise. A bill introduced last year into the chamber of deputies, the parliament's lower house, by the MP Emanuele Fiano to prohibit fascist propaganda would have allowed up to two years in jail for those who sold fascist souvenirs or performed the Roman salute, which is illegal in both Germany and Austria. After the opposition of Silvio Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia, and the Lega Nord, the bill was blocked in the senate.

"We are very worried," said Carla Nespolo, the president of the National Association of Italian Partisans (ANPI), a group founded by members of the Italian resistance against Mussolini. "These new fascists attack our offices and there seems to be no will to stop them. We asked the government to prevent the participation of fascist-inspired parties in the upcoming elections, because they were unconstitutional, and we never received an answer."

The Italian constitution forbids the "promotion of any association that pursues the aims of the Fascist party or anyone who exalts its principles." Yet the authorities have never intervened against CasaPound and Forza Nuova, whose members show off swastikas and fascist flags during their demonstrations.

The ANPI last year drew up a list of 500 internet sites praising fascism in Italy, asking that they be blocked. Nothing was done.

"These are sites that spread hatred among people, especially against migrants," said Nespolo, "especially against migrants. "And they do it by spreading fake news about refugees on the social networks." False accounts of rapes perpetrated by asylum seekers are shared by thousands on Facebook and Twitter.

"Fake news has played a crucial role in the propaganda of the extreme right," said Francesco Pira, a communications sociologist at the University of Messina and expert on fake news. "There seems to be no vigilance on them. The problem does not only concern the totally false news, but also news items where the word 'clandestine' is used to describe migrants, marking asylum seekers out as criminals, a notion that seems to be one of the most welcomed pieces of propaganda by the right."

Laura Boldrini, the president of the chamber of deputies, is a frequent target of fake news: she has both proposed fines and even imprisonment for those who spread false stories and, as a former spokeswoman for the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, was known for having a humanitarian approach to the migrant crisis. Immediately after the shootings in Macerata, a photo depicting Boldrini's "severed head" appeared with the inscription: "Decapitated by a Nigerian: this is the end she needed to meet in order to appreciate her friends' customs."

The shootings happened days after a Nigerian man was arrested in connection with the death of an 18-year-old Italian woman, Pamela Mastropietro, whose dismembered body was discovered hidden in two suitcases near Macerata. Rightwingers have seized on her death to promote their anti-migrant message.

Just as the right is moving forward, Benito Mussolini is appearing in Italian cinemas in the satire movie *I'm Back*, which imagines the dictator returning to the Italy of 2018. "The Italians, unlike the Germans, never dealt with their dictator, they have never removed him," said the director Luca Maniero. "Watching what is happening, today, in our country, I am convinced that if Mussolini came back, he would win the election."

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