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# Introduction: Not a Normal Country

In December 2000, I read a newsflash on the Internet that there had been a bomb explosion at the Rome offices of *Il Manifesto*, Italy's left-wing daily newspaper. The previous week I had been in Rome with the paper's sports editor, Matteo Patrono. I made urgent inquiries about Matteo's well-being and received an evocative email two hours later, telling me he was OK (he was out of the office at the time of the bomb) and that nobody apart from the bomber had been seriously injured. However, the intention had been to kill and he described to me the anxiety and fear about the wider implications of the incident.

Over the next few days I followed the story in the Italian newspapers. It appeared that the perpetrator of the bomb was a neo-Fascist, with links to right-wing extremist groups. There seemed to be bigger questions in the minds of commentators, however. Some warned of a return to the '*anni di piombo*' ('years of lead') in the 1970s, when terrorist groups of the left and right combined to bring instability to Italy's creaking political system. In particular, the latest bomb attack provided further confirmation, if any were needed, that the crisis of the state in those years had never been resolved. This was despite the '*mani pulite*' ('Clean Hands') investigations of the early 1990s led by the magistrates into political corruption which brought about the downfall of Italy's ruling Christian Democrats after the *Tangentopoli* ('Bribesville') scandal and the anti-Mafia reforms which followed the murders of the magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in the same period.

Another name was being mentioned in the inquiries and discussions at this time. Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's richest man, who had large media business interests, had spent a short time as Prime Minister in 1994, in a rapid rise to power that seemed to confirm the 'abnormality' of Italian politics in a period when its political system had virtually collapsed overnight. Now, less than six months before the next general election, opinion polls inexplicably put his party, Forza Italia, and prospective allies,

Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) and the Lega Nord (Northern League), ahead again, with the centre-left government, which had seen three different Prime Ministers in over four years, losing its way. With a long-standing interest in Italian politics, but not finding in conventional academic accounts sufficient explanations for these developments, I wanted to know what was going on. Why, for example, was Berlusconi, a figure who had connections to the previous discredited Prime Minister Bettino Craxi, and an entrepreneur who had started to monopolise the media, able to make such headway in Italy? More precisely, how were we to understand his appeal to ordinary Italians? What were we to make of the new Italian right, composed not only of Berlusconi, but 'post-Fascists' and what seemed to be Padanian nationalists? What was the legacy of the two dominant political cultures in Italy, namely political Catholicism after the demise of the Democrazia cristiana (Christian Democrats, or DC) and the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, or PCI), following the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe? Where was political life beyond the parties? And, in particular, what was the viability of Italy becoming a 'normal country' – the frequently declared objective of Italian politicians of left and right?

As I started my journey at the beginning of 2001, one that took me the length and breadth of the country, I began to get answers to some of these questions – inevitably, however, new ones appeared. Berlusconi's subsequent election in May 2001 was made possible by the splits and ineffectiveness of the Italian centre-left, his power as a media entrepreneur and his appeal as a successful businessman. Yet it soon became clear that the Berlusconi phenomenon had deeper origins in the crisis of the Italian state and owed much to the historical revision of Italy's Fascist past and the anti-Fascist postwar consensus that shaped the first Italian Republic. Its novelty, moreover, lay in its response to an impasse that followed the crisis in party politics in which the dominant interests of parties, the DC in particular, had been bound up with the state. This '*partitocrazia*' had allowed little room for other sorts of political forces.

In the age of political disengagement, and the centrality of new technology and marketing, Berlusconi represented a challenge to the essence of modern politics, notably in his preference for bypassing political norms and structures. He was not a typical

politician and, moreover, seemed to celebrate this fact with a certain style and panache. The centre-left had appeared best-placed to take advantage of *Tangentopoli*. The revamped DS was the party that most escaped claims of corruption, and articulated a language of modernity and new beginnings. Yet in government it looked tired as well as divided. It had failed to convince the public of its project. Berlusconi, on the other hand, had a lot to say.

His approach to politics contrasted sharply with that of the Christian Democrats, who had ruled Italy uninterrupted for nearly 50 years. After 1992, the party was in ruins; a small remaining rump, cobbled together in the *Unione democratici cristiana* (UDC), took its place in Berlusconi's *Casa delle libertà* (House of Liberties) coalition, while the more progressive Catholic centre reorganised under Romano Prodi in the *Margherita* ('Daisy') party. Such was the disarray among Catholic politicians that for a while they continued to share the same headquarters in *Palazzo del Gesù*. The Catholic political hegemony was over, while Italy's Catholic *culture* was fragmenting in the face of social change. While the DC had relied on clientelism, the corrupt web of favours which had helped sustain its 'regime', it had also derived loyalty from a sense of social solidarity and cohesion, reproduced in social, familial and cultural rituals, without ever succeeding

much more complex. Conservative family structures largely remained with, for example, many young people continuing to live at home until their 30s, particularly in the South. Pictures of the Madonna and busts of Padre Pio, the beatified saint, adorned houses and piazzas throughout Italy, as a reminder that Catholic faith remained important. Yet these factors must be seen alongside greater liberal freedoms, large generational differences and weaker political alignment. The family itself remained for many commentators the focal point of social life and identity.<sup>1</sup>

Italian Communism, the other dimension of Italy's 'mass' political culture, predictably declined after the fall of the Berlin Wall. A name change from the Italian Communist Party to the Party of the Democratic Left (later Left Democrats), however, was not enough to arrest a crisis in identity, as splits, revisions, self-analysis and new challenges all brought into doubt the party's future ideological and strategic role. The PCI, as the party most embedded in the legacy of the Resistance, had been able to cohere solidarity amongst trade unions and social movements, and this allowed it to organise a significant part of Italy's cultural life. In this it was helped by impressive cohorts of intellectuals. It also retained a strong local presence leading to long periods in control of municipal councils, for which it gained a broad respect for good government, notably in the 'Red Belt' of Tuscany, Umbria and Emilia Romagna. The problem it faced was as a party of permanent opposition; apart from a brief period in government in the immediate postwar years and a surge in support in the mid 1970s, it was never able to dismantle the hegemony of the Christian Democrats, who were backed by both the Vatican and the White House. Ironically, for the party least affected by *Tangentopoli*, it was unable to take advantage of the Christian Democrats' collapse because of its own crisis following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The passing of the PCI meant that the two dominant political traditions of modern Italy were now at an end. In this Catholic-Communist polarity, a conflict had been played out at all levels of Italian society, ranging from festivals and the formation of different trade union federations to sport, where strong rivalry existed between the two main cyclists in the 1950s, the Communist Gino Bardoli and the Christian Democrat Fausto

Coppi (cycling at the time being Italy's leading sport). The composition of the two parties (the PCI, for example, had 2 million members at its peak), together with their roles in Italian society, made them the clearest example of mass parties in Europe. This delineated the political parameters of Italian politics, made more complex by the Cold War, and the domination of the DC, with (as we now know) US support and Mafia cooperation. The end of this uniquely Italian settlement created a vacuum for new political forces. Ironically, in the realignment of Italian politics that took place after *Tangentopoli*, Catholics and Communists often found themselves on the same side, in the Ulivo (Olive Tree) coalition.

Italy is a country where the presence of history is always apparent. Wherever you go, historical monuments adorn piazzas, partisans are remembered in memorials, streets have been named after historical figures, intellectuals and artists, and the regular celebration of festivals – religious, cultural and political – reaffirms the past as a constant source of constraint on the present and future. In the aftermath of the crisis of 1992–94, however, many politicians and commentators were preoccupied with rewriting or trying to forget the past. There was an urgent need to move on from the crisis in the state, a weak civil society, institutional incompetence, the lack of national identity, the legacy of the Mafia and corruption. Many talked about ‘years of transition’, though towards what was rarely made clear. Even amongst scholars of Italian history, there is little agreement over the precise moment the First Republic ends or, indeed, whether the changes of the early 1990s, such as the collapse of the old parties, the arrival of a new electoral system and the prospect of alternating governments, were sufficient to constitute a new ‘Second Republic’. Some have argued that the continuation of multiple parties, institutional inefficiency and parliamentary inertia have reflected the same problems of the pre-1992 period.

Underlying much of this emphasis on transition and the urgent need for new beginnings is the search for normality. Postwar politics in Italy, of course, was rarely ‘normal’. Almost uninterrupted rule by one party, in alliance with numerous smaller ones, with Communists supplying the main opposition, was not normal by any definition. Italy has produced more than 50 governments since 1945, though the extent of DC hegemony

throughout most of the period makes them more akin to cabinet reshuffles. The *anni di piombo*, which saw violence on a major scale from right and left extremes, as well as conspiracy on behalf of the state, also marked out Italy from its European neighbours. There is no strong social democratic tradition in Italy, nor historically has there been a conventional party of the right, while the numbers of smaller parties has continued to escalate.

The race for normality seemed to characterise the approaches of all the political parties, including many of the new ones. The National Alliance ‘came in from the cold’, gave up its ‘neo-Fascist’ heritage, became ‘post-Fascist’ and, under the leadership of Gianfranco Fini, has even sought the ground of the mainstream European right, though its agenda, as the example of Monte Sole will show later in the book, is derived from a significantly revisionist account of Italy’s troubled past. Fini’s appointment as Foreign Minister in November 2004 marked a new high in his own personal goal of becoming a statesman as well as a further breakthrough in his party’s attempts to claim a new legitimacy.

The need for normality was also prominent on the left. The ex-Communist PDS, under the leadership of Massimo D’Alema, for a short period attempted to mimic a Blairite ‘third way’, while Walter Veltroni, another of its leaders, became convinced of the example of the American Democrats. Models and examples from other countries, particularly the US and the UK, seemed particularly attractive in this moment of reconstruction. All parties, meanwhile – with the exception of the ‘regionalist’ Northern League – talked ambitiously of resolving strong regional variations, including

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was strongly focused on gaining entry into the euro, and close cooperation with European governments and centre-left parties in other countries. However, the Berlusconi government has taken this search for 'international legitimacy' to a new level. Although more 'Euro-sceptic' than the previous administration, much energy has been spent exaggerating Italy's prestige in the world order, while no opportunity for photocalls with allies, notably George W Bush and Tony Blair, has been missed. Berlusconi has been explicit about the material benefits for Italy that will come with close alliance with the world's leading statesmen. This extends to stressing strong personal ties, including the 'private' visit of Tony Blair to Villa Certosa, Berlusconi's Sardinian retreat, in August 2004.<sup>3</sup>

#### PAST IMPERFECT: FUTURE TENSE

Notwithstanding this almost uniform need to break with the past in order to arrive at a normal political system, past events are always round the corner, often reappearing when least expected. Despite the novelty of Berlusconi, whose political origins and development are discussed in the first chapter of this book, many aspects of the crisis of 1992–94 and politics since then have longer origins, which make the transition to a normal country – whatever that means – more problematic.

The 1970s, a period in which the lack of 'sense of state' was graphically demonstrated by fears of a right-wing coup and 'left-' and 'right-'wing terrorism, remains a crucial period for subsequent developments, including those discussed in this book. These include the crisis of identity on the left, the first signs of corruption and Mafia collaboration in the DC, and the challenge to the *partitocrazia* from civil society, notably the autonomous youth and student movements. This period marked the beginning of the end of the Christian Democratic–Communist paradigm. But it was the crisis of the state that was most significant. In a series of articles in *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Mondo* in 1975, Pier Paolo Pasolini, one of Italy's leading intellectuals, accused the ruling Christian Democrats of corruption, collaboration with the CIA and complicity with the Mafia. They were guilty of a further 'moral crime', according to Pasolini, for failing to find and punish the neo-Fascists who carried out bombings in major Italian cities.

Pasolini himself was murdered later that year, allegedly by a male prostitute he had met in Ostia outside Rome; even this was a cause of speculation and numerous conspiracy theories.

The decade of violence reached its climax in March 1978 when Aldo Moro, the former Italian Prime Minister and President of the Christian Democrats, was kidnapped on his way to parliament, where he was about to sign an historic agreement between the DC and the PCI. This agreement was to be the apex of the PCI's influence, making the government of the country impossible without their support. In the following weeks before his eventual murder, Moro was the central figure in an episode that said much about Italy's long-running crisis of the state. Moro had risen through the ranks of the DC and was known to be a shrewd and effective politician. His role had been crucial in maintaining good terms with the Communists who, under their popular and innovative leader, Enrico Berlinguer, had embarked on a strategy defined as the 'historic compromise', in which they would attempt to engage with progressive sections of Catholic opinion as a long-term solution to their political isolation. With their electoral support gradually increasing and reaching its peak in the mid 1970s, the DC became unable to rule effectively without the PCI's support; as a result, concessions and bargaining took on an increasing importance.

As Leonardo Sciascia has argued in his detailed study, the Moro case raised questions at the heart of Italy's crisis, namely the impossibility of reforming the DC leadership, the corruptions of power, secrecy in defence of party interests and, above all, the confusion between a 'sense of state' and the occupation and manipulation of power. In the 54 days of negotiation between Moro, his kidnapers and the political class, Moro himself seemed to become aware of many of these contradictions. As he tried to save himself by requesting that the DC show its humanity and negotiate with the Red Brigades, he became increasingly critical of their intransigence and more aware of the realities of power. As Sciascia writes:

He had lived for power and by power up to nine o'clock on the morning of 16 March. But now he knows it is the others who possess it. And in the others he perceives its ugly, idiotic, cruel countenance.<sup>4</sup>

In their earlier statements, the DC leadership had praised Moro for his 'great statesmanship'. In fact, as Sciascia reminds us, he was not a great statesman but a great politician: 'neither Moro nor the party he presided over ever had a "sense of the state"'.<sup>5</sup> As the friction increased, Moro's former allies in the DC leadership put out statements of a different kind, in which they distinguished the 'new' from the 'old' Moro: 'He is not the man we knew, whose spiritual, political, juridical vision inspired our participation in the establishment of this Republican constitution.'<sup>6</sup> Moro's response was: 'I do not wish to be surrounded by those in power...Let none of those responsible seek to hide behind the call of an imaginary duty. All things will come to light. Soon they will come to light.'<sup>7</sup>

The Moro case continues to have repercussions for contemporary Italian politics. The absence of a sense of state remains, despite the language of reform and modernisation. This crisis, as we shall see, has intensified in the Berlusconi years. If anybody needs reminding of the crisis of the state, they need look no further than the figure of Giulio Andreotti, the leading Christian Democrat in the postwar years and one of those attacked by Moro from his prison. In the aftermath of *Tangentopoli* and Mafia murders, a new law was passed which made it possible to try politicians, and Andreotti was brought to court in 1993 on charges of 'Mafia association'. A further case of conspiracy to murder was also made and he was initially found guilty of this offence and sentenced to 24 years in prison. The murder for which he was convicted was that of Mino Pecorelli, an investigative journalist who allegedly was about to publish revelations about Andreotti's Mafia links based on diaries kept by Aldo Moro while in captivity. Presumably, these were the things that Moro promised, on the eve of his murder, would 'soon come to light'.

In 2004, following typically long, drawn-out trials, Andreotti was finally released on appeal due to 'insufficient evidence'. The lack of evidence on the question of Mafia links was a result of the difficulty of proving Mafia association *after* 1980 (Mafia association only became a crime in Italy in 1982). There was no difficulty in proving Mafia associations before then. As the appeal court stated: 'The court finds that Andreotti's real, enduring and friendly openness towards *mafiosi* did not last beyond the spring of 1980.'

The response from Italy's political class to Andreotti's release says much about the failure of Italian politicians to take historical and political responsibility for the past. It also confirms the continuing disjuncture between the political class and civil society, a feature of this book. Much of the centre-left as well as the centre-right welcomed the verdict, and Andreotti was variously lauded as 'a great statesman' or 'wise leader'. Now a life senator, he is a regular pundit in the Italian media, frequently asked to comment on historical events or topical issues.

The Moro case also contained significant implications for the future of the Italian left. His murder meant the end of Berlinguer's patient political strategy, the 'historic compromise'. Though he continued to lead the PCI until his death in 1984 under a new strategic idea of the 'democratic alternative', the party never recovered its support and lacked a clear political identity. This problem was not resolved – indeed, it was amplified – by the birth of the party's successor, the PDS. The division it created, with a minority of the party leaving to form Rifondazione comunista, mirrored to some extent the differing reactions to Berlinguer's earlier strategy. The majority two-thirds, loyal to the PCI's leadership, remained together in the new party and sought a new alliance with reformed Christian Democrats, while the remaining third, which reflected many of those critical of Berlinguer, sought a more radical alternative. However, the historic compromise was constructed by a mass party from a long period of opposition under severe Cold War constraints. The new party needed to find an ideology and sense of identity that drew on its existing support. Since its foundation it has never managed to do this, nervously glancing over its shoulder at its past while peering hopefully through rose-tinted spectacles at the prospect of turning itself into the British Labour Party or the American Democrats. Weak leadership and a declining membership have meant that the PDS (DS from 1998) has made little headway in providing a new alternative. Aldo Moro and Enrico Berlinguer were the last two great leaders in Italian politics; the failure to replace them has been a significant factor in Berlusconi's success.

On 9 May 1978, the same day that Moro's body was found in Rome, the death of a young Sicilian, Peppino Impastato, was also reported in the press. He had been found dead near a railway line in Cinisi, a small town in Sicily, not far from Palermo. Impastato

had been a member of a left-wing opposition party (Democrazia proletaria, or Dp) and had campaigned throughout his young life against the Mafia. The son of a *mafioso*, he was brought up close to the headquarters of the local Mafia boss, Tano Badalamenti, who was to be imprisoned in the US for Mafia association in the 1980s. At the time, it was claimed that Impastato had died attempting to blow up the railway line, in a death compared to that of the left-wing publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli in 1972. It was not until a major film was made of his life, 22 years later, that the case was reopened and the suspicions of his family and friends were confirmed – namely, that he had been murdered on the instructions of Badalamenti.<sup>8</sup>

Impastato's murder and the attempts to cover it up were also indicative of this shady era of Italian politics, in which fear, conspiracy and secrecy did battle with hope, protest and idealism. His short life also says much about the politics of the 1970s and its idealistic and militant youth movements, as significant in their own way as the Paris student revolt of 1968. In Cinisi, Impastato had founded a free radio station, Radio Aut, which he used to undermine the Mafia through satire, music and political polemic. This movement, which included arguments for workers' control, direct action against multinational corporations and student occupations, was formed in opposition not only to the corruptions and repressions of the Italian state, but also as a critique of the PCI, the historic compromise and the limitations of party politics. In many ways, as later chapters will show, its mix of culture and politics, direct action and grassroots mobilisation prefigured the anti-global capitalist movements which grew from the late 1990s and which, in Italy, reached their peak at the time of the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001. The hopes of Italy's youth continued to drive oppositional politics in the era of Berlusconi as they did in the era of Andreotti in the 1970s.

It is also possible to discern the wider political and historical significance of this event. Impastato's death was overlooked partly because it coincided with the Moro case. It was also overlooked because of the marginalisation of Sicily and the South in general, which contain Italy's most economically underdeveloped regions, and have long suffered most from political corruption and clientelism under the control of the Mafia. This view of the South is partly behind the advance of the Northern League,

whose electoral support grew in light of its denunciation of the corruptions in Rome and wider stereotypical assumptions about 'lazy southerners'. Yet, the case of Impastato demands that the South be taken seriously. His campaign for justice has been followed by wider evidence of resistance and the renaissance of a civic spirit in the South. The 'Palermo Spring', led by Leoluca Orlando in the mid 1980s, brought big changes to Sicily's capital and in particular new confidence in the fight against the Mafia, leading to the imprisonment of many *mafiosi*. The type of courage demonstrated by Impastato and other anti-mafia campaigners was no longer an isolated phenomenon but was now part of a mainstream alternative movement.

Meanwhile, the economic development of Puglia and parts of Basilicata, along Italy's heel, offered new opportunities as well as a new confidence. In the Berlusconi years, the South, often the target of the governing coalition's wrath and the recipient of many broken promises of economic and social reform, began to strike back. The new associations and movements, not conditioned by Italy's party system and often stretching beyond the boundaries of left and right, brought new life to Italy's body politic, presenting an alternative to Berlusconi's populism. This civic spirit also challenged long-standing assumptions about apathy, conservatism, and the corrosive aspects of Italian familism.

The Berlusconi years can therefore only be understood within the context of the upheavals of Italian political history. Berlusconi himself is connected to the previous era by his membership from 1978 of Propaganda 2 (P2), the conspiratorial and anti-Communist organisation made up of a cross-section of Italy's power elite, which included three government ministers and 44 MPs, leading army officers, newspaper editors and bankers. Its purpose was to infiltrate and fund key areas of Italy's public institutions in order to halt the rise of the left.<sup>9</sup> Berlusconi's rise to power was cemented in the Milan world of the 1980s, where he made his money and contacts and became close friends with Bettino Craxi, Italy's Prime Minister in the mid 1980s, who was later convicted of corruption.

The Berlusconi years do, however, mark a departure in fundamental ways that suggest new political faultlines and trajectories distinct from the politics of the past. Berlusconi started to impose himself in the vacuum that followed the collapse of

the DC and the crisis on the left. He flourished in the aftermath of the decline of the *partitocrazia* and the general contempt held by Italians for their politicians. This era marked the arrival of the businessman as politician. As the first part of this book shows, the Berlusconi phenomenon was one response to the crisis of the state and the erosion of trust in conventional politics. It was a postmodern response in that it altered the traditional relationship between the citizen and politics through the use of new global media, created a different role for the political party (Forza Italia, for example, was a business party founded on a network of football clubs) and prospered in the wake of the two grand narratives in Italian politics, namely political Catholicism and Communism. It was also a *populist* response in that it appealed directly to citizens, often as consumers, while pushing at the boundaries not only of formal democratic politics, but legality and constitutional government. This postmodern populism ultimately presented a challenge to politics itself, with the erosion of dissent and the subordination of public interests to private interests.

As I travelled in Italy these shifts became more visible and tangible in all areas of Italian society. Political corruption has not gone away, but lives on in new forms. The stench of uncleared rubbish in Naples, with more than a whiff of the Camorra lurking in the background, was a sufficient enough reminder. The harrowing sirens of the emergency services seemed to signal the end of innocence of another generation as the Genoa G8 protests were broken up by the violence of the *carabinieri* (paramilitary police), apparently buoyed by the encouraging words of Deputy Prime Minister Gianfranco Fini; detained protesters were forced to sing Fascist songs. The increasingly xenophobic opposition to immigrants, evident in the rhetoric of Umberto Bossi and his depleted band of supporters, alarmingly found its way into the conversations of ordinary Italians. Like Tobias Jones in his fascinating and prescient study of Berlusconi, I also found that breaking the rules was not only accepted but expected, and to be cunning was worthy of particular praise.<sup>10</sup> The duplicity of those in power and indifference from those without it was also disconcerting. It was also clear that power in Italy, as Pasolini had argued 30 years before, remained a complex web of intrigue, bureaucracy, conspiracy and inertia. It was exercised differently, however. To witness the influence of Silvio Berlusconi it was

necessary only to switch to one of his many TV channels, in a country saturated by television, usually running uninterrupted in the kitchens of most Italian homes. Tune in, for example, to Rete 4, and hear the news delivered by Emilo Fede, for daily denunciations of the magistrates and regular updates of the achievements of his old friend the Prime Minister.

Yet, as I travelled through what remains a beautiful, complex and fascinating country, I encountered another Italy, one where there was a revival of civil society, the birth of a new associationism and a politics that took place outside political parties. Extraordinary energy, organisational endeavour, idealism and a new civic spirit drove many of the movements and associations, often from sections of Italian society where such activity would be least expected. This was an attempt to rebuild politics, inspired by a return of idealism in the movements of the left, though by no means confined to this, as the renaissance in the South and Sicily, and the breadth of alternative hopes and visions – from pacifism to ‘slow food’ – show.

Italy’s long-term future remains uncertain, with the country divided and evidence of its decline increasing. What became most obvious to me was that Italy had not been a ‘normal country’ before Berlusconi, and was even less of one under his rule, but would not become one in the years following. Attempts by politicians of left and right had not brought this any closer. Those commentators who saw in Gianfranco Fini’s post-Fascist National Alliance a ‘mainstream’ right-wing party, or in Piero Fassino’s (and Massimo D’Alema’s) Left Democrats a natural evolution to a Blairite third way – one proposition as equally preposterous as the other – were going to be disappointed. Italy will not become a normal country. The question of what country it could become is the focus of this book.

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