

Fascism in Power

After the March on Rome, Mussolini was made Prime Minister of Italy. His political goal was **totalitarianism**: a society where the state has complete control over all citizens. But in 1923 he still faced challenges and potential challenges.

The Fascists only had 35 out of 535 members of parliament, and they could only rule by cooperating with **other parties**. Meanwhile the **socialists** were still, in spite of all the violence, a strong political force. **The Catholic Church**, the largest religious organisation in the world, had its headquarters in Rome and was involved in a long-running dispute with the Italian state. Many of the Italian people still hated Mussolini and the Fascists and wanted to resist.

But Mussolini in power could count on:

1. Wealthy backers
2. The monarchy
3. Huge numbers of violent Blackshirts

He was able to deal with the above challenges one by one.

One month after the March on Rome, the Blackshirts attacked an anti-fascist protest in Turin, killing 11 people. After that, people were afraid to protest.

Early in 1923 Mussolini made his Fascist Blackshirt squads into an official state **militia**. Now their violence was 100% legal. Later that year he sent the Italian army to seize the Greek island of **Corfu**. This military success made him more popular.

In June 1923 Mussolini brought in the **Acerbo Law**. This law meant that whatever party received the most votes would get 2/3 of seats in parliament. The following year, the Fascists and their allies received 64% of the vote.

Socialist leader Giacomo Matteoti pointed out that the election was dominated by Fascist intimidation, violence and fraud. A few days later, Matteoti was abducted and murdered by Fascists. At first Mussolini denied that he was responsible. The socialists walked out of parliament in protest. But this only helped Mussolini, who was rid of his worst enemies.

In January 1925 Mussolini declared that he was responsible for all fascist violence, including the murder of Matteoti. He challenged his opponents to rise up against him, but none dared. From then on, Mussolini was the leader of an open **dictatorship**. He became known as **Il Duce** (the leader) and later in the year he passed a law allowing him to **rule by decree**. He could pass laws himself without a vote in parliament. Soon all candidates for parliament had to be vetted by the Grand Council of Fascism.

In 1926-7 Mussolini survived two attempts to assassinate him. In 1927 he set up the OVRA, a secret police force with 700 agents and 100,000 informants. They deported thousands of people to prison camps on small islands off the coast of Italy.

The Pope and bishops supported Mussolini, but the Catholic Church represented a powerful force in Italian society. If the Church chose to do so, it could pose a threat to fascism. In 1929 the Italian fascist state and the Catholic Church signed the **Lateran Treaty**.

This treaty agreed:

- That the Catholic Church could control an area of Rome called **Vatican City** which would be its own independent state.
- That the Italian state would pay compensation for seizing Rome in 1870.
- That divorce would never be allowed in Italy.
- That Catholic priests would be paid by the state.
- That Catholicism would be the state religion and that religious education would take place in Italian schools.

Meanwhile the church agreed to recognise the Italian state for the first time, and to support the fascist attacks on socialism.

For the fascists the Lateran Treaty was a major success. The Catholic Church would not pose a threat to Mussolini, at least for now.

