On Reforms, Premier Renzi Risks a Showdown

Judith Harris (September 09, 2015)



Reform of the Senate to streamline the legislative process is a hallmark of his governing project, but Premier Matteo Renzi faces both in-house opposition and an avalanche of 350,000 amendments. Together these obstacles bring the risk of a showdown.

ROME – Back in ancient Rome players in a dice game used the phrase, “O la va o la spacca.” In one translation this means “Make it or break it;” in another, “Either piss or get off the pot.” It certainly means to go for broke, and in his frustration at lack of completion of the crucial reforms which are the hallmark of his governing project, Premier Matteo Renzi risks approaching just this sort of showdown.

The obstreperous left wing of his own Partito Democratico (PD) is basically blocking the two major

items on Renzi's reform agenda. The first is an ambitious Constitutional change that would slash the size of the Senate and, no less importantly, its power over legislation already passed in the Chamber of Deputies. Future senators would not be directly elected by Italian voters. Pared down to fewer than one-third of its present 315 members who serve six-year terms (plus another five or more appointed senators), would be a compilation of people elected to the regional assemblies plus the mayors of some cities. The Senate could not pronounce on major legislation, but would be "excluded from co-participation in the political directives and votes of confidence for the government." (For details, see: >>> [2])

The second bill, dubbed the "Italicum," calls for reform of the election procedure. In Renzi's plans the Italicum is crucial, but still takes less precedence than Senate reform, which he wants to see passed within October, while also promising that it will be subject to a future popular referendum.

In theory, Renzi has a slender majority of from six to 10 votes in the Senate, but his in-house opposition to Senate reform, with up to 30 votes, would trounce his reform bill. This opposition leader is Renzi's predecessor as party chief, Pierluigi Bersani, backed by some intellectuals and by the party's traditionally leftist trade unionist component. They insist that senators be popularly elected and argue that, regarding any such important change in the Italian Constitution, an individual's conscience outweighs party discipline.

"But this is not a question of party discipline," Renzi retorted Wednesday. "Let's not go to the barricades!" For Renzi, under the present rules of the Constitution, bills must be approved in both Chamber and Senate with exactly the same wording, or sent back for another round. This means that the Senate can easily and simply block any bill brought before it, even bringing the legislative process to a full stop.

The proposed new Senate would have some echoes of the Bundesrat (the Senate equivalent in Germany) in giving larger regions relatively more senators than small regions – "a re-equilibrating in favor of the larger regions, which would have more representatives or votes," in the words of Jorg Luther, professor of constitutional law at the Piemonte Orientale University. The result is that, says Prof. Luther, "Over the long term the veto power of the Bundesrat has decreased, showing a tendency that could be useful also for Italy."

And there is more trouble because of serious obstruction from outside Renzi's governing area. A total of 513,450 amendments have been tacked onto the Senate reform bill, and merely to print these proposed amendments has required 55,000 sheets of paper printed on both sides. Of the total, 510,000 amendments were drafted (so to speak: in fact, computer-drafted sometimes with only tiny changes in wording) by Roberto Calderoli of the Northern League. As a result, only one print-out is being made, and the 28 members of the Senate's Constitutional Affairs Commission, headed by the PD's capable Anna Finocchiaro, will review the amendments, one by one, on a big screen and on i-pads. At present, 134 amendments have been approved, 62 in the Senate and 72 in The Chamber.

How Renzi will deal with the Senate reform bill, when it finally reaches the Senate floor, is unknown. As one editorial writer predicts, , "This time there will be winners and losers." Perhaps the most serious risk, if no mediated solution is found, is for new elections to be called two years ahead of time, even as the Lega's Matteo Salvini (15.1% in the latest polls) and the Movimento Cinque Stelle's Beppe Grillo (25.9% and growing) are madly campaigning, a fact that may help bring peace

between the two warring clans of the PD.

Bersani is promising that mediation is possible, but just where this clash is heading is unclear. Some are calling Renzi's majority within the PD "the Premier's party," as if it were already autonomous and in opposition to the traditional Partito Democratico. Most importantly, with these two stumbling blocks – the PD opposition and the avalanche of amendments -- what will be the future of the government if the reform bill flops? Will it bring down the government itself, as some fear?

As a recent Reuters news agency report has pointed out, "Renzi came to power last year promising to revitalise Italy, a country which has had 63 government in almost as many years and whose economy has scarcely grown since it became a founder member of the euro zone 16 years ago."

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