

Grillo's Movimento Now Italy's Largest Single Party



The Five Star Movement (M5S) founded by Beppe Grillo is now the largest single party in Italy, new public opinion polls show. One result of the forward leap to perhaps 32% of potential voter support is that early national general elections seem unlikely.

ROME -- With the secession of a group of left-leaning parliamentarians headed by Pier Luigi Bersani and Massimo D'Alema, the Partito Democratico (PD), which has dominated Italian politics for the past three years, has now shrunk to second place. This posits the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S, the Five Star Movement) founded by Beppe Grillo at the theoretical top of what is an overlong list of Italian political parties which, to form a government, must merge into unlikely coalitions.

As a result, despite the PD defections, which slips that party down to perhaps 24%, early elections now appear unlikely, and Italians will not vote until the normal end of the legislature in Spring 2018. In the last national general elections, held February 2013, Grillo's movement won just 25.5% of the



vote, five points fewer than the PD. But thanks to the PD scism and to corruption scandals that are sullyng that party's image, today the M5S is in pole position, with perhaps 32% of the potential vote, according to the latest opinion polls. "We're at the top and must protect our position," A M5S spokesman boasted this week, "especially because we are swimming in a pool of sharks."

What does the party stand for? Grillo's more or less second in command is Luigi Di Maio. Speaking March 24 at the Foreign Press Association in Rome, Di Maio said he wants a "more democratic, less hypocritical" Europe. "You can go into the Euro currency but not out of it -- we want a referendum on this."

Those fearful of Grillo power console themselves by pointing out that his party is still far from the 40% that, with the freebie addition of members of parliament, would hoist the M5S into an automatic majority and hence quite possibly in charge of the government. Another perhaps mitigating factor is that the polls suggest that the Bersani-D'Alema scismatic new left, nicknamed the "Demo-Progressisti," seems to command no more than 4% of the potential vote -- considerably less than the 10% that had been earlier predicted.

Grillo launched the movement back in 2010 in order to promote a more direct democracy, especially via internet participation. During the five years between elections, the voters have almost no contact with the person who supposedly represents them, say Grillo and his his lieutenants. "You vote for them, but it's obvious that they make promises they don't keep."

Still, Grillo's is now the single largest party in Italy, and inevitably, the pundits and politicoes are taking a hard look at Grillo's policies and personality. Grillo himself may once have been a comedian, but is not always a laughing matter. Many of his own party members are openly resentful of what they see as his one-man rule, and a certain number have as a result resigned.

At the same time he continues to oust his critics from the party. The latest internal squabble is over his simply cancelling the candidacy of Marika Cassimatis, whom local movement supporters had chosen as their candidate for mayor of Genoa. Grillo simply ignored that online vote and instead ordered another, won by Luca Pirondini. To his critics this week Grillo retorted: "You don't like the party -- well, go and start your own!"

Meantime, the Italian right is splintered into at least three parties, but the Northern League (which is no longer particularly Northern) of Matteo Salvini and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, now back in business, are supposedly engaged in not particularly secret talks about future cooperation.

The essential problem remains: Italian politics is divided into three parts, and no future government can come to power without forging alliances with others. With the increased strength of the M5S, this jockeying for allies has already begun, now with new twists. Bersani, former Communist, has suggested that it is time his new party of Dem-Progressives to begin negotiations with Grillo's movement. At present Grillo haughtily rejects the overture, while suggesting that he just might start negotiating with Matteo Salvini because "less discredited" than those on the left, who of course include Bersani. Whither all this? Wait and see.



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