

Peeking Through the Thick Election Fog

Judith Harris (November 10, 2012)



Whether enthusiasts for Obama or for Romney, countless Italians have been remarking, with open envy, that the U.S. presidential election showed that a clear choice could be made, and was. Here, with national general elections looming within five months or less, all is still opaque.

ROME - No one can be certain when the elections will take place, save that they will be before mid-2013. No one knows for certain who the candidates will be, or - Heaven forbid - their programs. No one knows what shape a governing coalition will assume, although this is an all-important question in a country where no single party can hope to obtain a majority of the votes cast, or even 30%. No one knows what premier will emerge from the vote. Not least, no one yet knows under what



rules the elections will take place because the parties today in Parliament, which are the only ones entitled to make that decision, continue to quarrel among themselves.

To break this impasse, the so-called technical (i.e., non-political) government of "experts" under the leadership of the economist Mario Monti has proposed April 7 for national general elections. These are important elections: the winners will subsequently elect a successor to Italy's good shepherd president, Giorgio Napolitano, whose seven-year stint is coming to an end. Premier Monti proposes, in addition, to save state coffers as much as one hundred million euros by postponing elections to regional governments in Lazio, Lombardy and Molise, currently slated for late January, to the same April 7. But even this suggestion, which sounds eminently sage, generates controversy among the unlikely bedfellows whose votes in Parliament have kept Monti in power for a year now: the rightist Partito della Liberta' founded by Silvio Berlusconi but now run by Angelino Alfano (Pdl) as Berlusconi's clout fades; the centrist Catholic Union of Christian and Center Democrats (UDC) of Pier Ferdinando Casini and the left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD) led by Pier Luigi Bersani.

The panic over revising the rules governing the national general election is palpable. At the moment the "Porcellum" (pig law), as the election law voted in 2005 is quite rightly called, hands the winning coalition (not the single party) a premium of extra members of Parliament so that the winners automatically control 55% of the votes on any legislation. Individual candidates are not elected; the parties choose the list in the smoke-filled back room. Today, with the body politic hacked into bits, the law still holds.

The problem is that the vote two weeks ago in Sicily showed just how many votes the renegade, boistrous, angry comedian Beppe Grillo can command. Founded only three years ago, Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) participated in last May's local elections in Parma, Genoa and Verona, where the M5S bested Berlusconi's once-powerful Pdl. At local elections in Palermo that same month, Grillo's movement fared poorly, commanding a mere 4% of the vote. But only five months later, in the pan-Sicilian vote just two weeks ago, the M5S bounced up to claim 15% of the vote - more than any other political organization in Sicily - in a campaign, moreover, costing just E25,000.

The prospect that Sicily is showing the way, and that the M5S just may become the single largest party in Italy, has scared rival politicians of every stripe witless. Should Grillo become the big winner in the coming national general elections, the dread Porcellum with its gift box of members of Parliament would automatically kite Grillo into pole position for premier, as he well knows. To ward off such a specter, this week the jittery powers-that-be finally rushed into a committee meeting in Parliament to revise the Porcellum. Their consensus was that the best way to avoid a lone cowboy party from walking away with the freebie collection of votes would be to set the minimum vote at the polls at 42%, which just might be rounded down to 40%. Grillo was not pleased. "This is a coup d'etat," Grillo protested, or rather, shouted. At the moment, it is not; the proposed revision remains stuck in committee. For the moment, the Porcellum is still valid.

Meantime Grillo, comic by profession turned piazza political orator, himself has come in for flak from a few of his own supporters. It may not be fair play, but "grillo" means "cricket" in English, and indeed the angry outsider Beppe Grillo is a rasping, noisy cricket, and the only one allowed to chirp. None of his M5S supporters is allowed to make comments on TV or elsewhere, and when the lissome Federica Salsi, who represents the M5S in local politics in Bologna, appeared on a TV talk show, Grillo furiously derided her for having "a media orgasm.... Your friends and relatives back home applaud as they share your excitement at a fleeting moment of celebrity."

Salsi struck back, calling Grillo a male "chauvinist," but to scant effect. The shaggy-haired Grillo is a consummate media manager whose highly emotional piazza monologues are regularly shown on TV at no cost to himself. Between social network activism and free media coverage, his virulent attacks on the political party leaders, down to and including insults to Premier Mario Monti, win an immense amount of free publicity even as he skillfully refuses to give interviews, and participates in no debates in which his ideas and program can be challenged.. His two-hour swim across the Straits of Messina, and mini-rally on the beach at its completion, successfully launched his movement's political campaign in Sicily last month.



Grillo's posture remains that of the official outsider--the guarantor for all those who want to protest. And yet, just as rival party leaders fear him, he seems to be positioning himself for a seat at the power table. If realized, his potential alliance with Antonio Di Pietro's Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values, or IdV) would legally turn Grillo's movement into a party. The alliance has more or less been denied, and Di Pietro himself has come under criticism for allegedly owing a large number of apartments; when asked about this he stuttered without, however, explaining how he came into the funds permitting such acquisitions. For the moment, in the deep fog, anything is possible.

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