

Renzi, Berlusconi Bank on the New-Look Future

Judith Harris (October 23, 2014)



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ROME – “Italicum” – the agreement for reform of Italy’s election system hatched last February by that unlikely couple, Premier Matteo Renzi and former Premier Silvio Berlusconi – still looks a bit like pie in the sky. Nevertheless, it is still high on the political agenda, though evolving with important novelties.

About a month ago the two met once more, each with just one aide, to go over the main tenets of the proposal. By the terms of their original agreement a national general election would be, as in France, a two-step affair. First coalitions would face off against each other, and then a run-off would follow. So as to guarantee governance, the winning coalition would then receive a freebie bounty of extra MPs. Today, however, instead of coalitions pitted against each other the plan calls for the horde of single parties to compete before the run-off between the top two. That phase two winner



would receive 55% of the MPs. In the revised agreement, moreover, no Senate vote would take place, so as to speed up the process. As Renzi says repeatedly, he wants to “simplify” things political, and these proposed changes, if and when they are finalized, should do just that.

How did it come about that two such unlikely bedfellows, Renzi and Berlusconi, believe they can succeed in rewriting Italian politics? First, the new “Italicum” version (already being called jokingly the “Renzellicum”) reflects Renzi’s rather remarkable success in marshaling broad popular support for renovating the Partito Democratico (PD). “He figures he can win 51% of a vote,” confided one of his insiders. In so doing Renzi is challenging the old-style party he inherited from its past leaders Pier Luigi Bersani and Massimo D’Alema as well as younger traditionalists in the PD like Gianni Cuperlo. Renzi is also at odds with labor leaders like Susanna Camusso, general secretary of the leftist CGIL union, who has called for a nation-wide general strike against the Renzi government’s labor reform called the Jobs Act, which curbs the rights of workers let go.

As for Berlusconi, whose Forza Italia (FI) party now ranks at most third in Italy after Renzi’s PD and Beppe Grillo’s Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), the former Premier seems certain that time is in his favor; indeed, this new agreement with Renzi seems posited on there being no early elections this year. Berlusconi’s point is to watch the other leaders stew in their own juices, beginning with Grillo, some of whose brighter stars are abandoning him. Grillo has done his part to alienate many of his own by kicking out a dozen members of parliament (11 senators, one MP) elected on his ticket and almost as many regional counselors throughout Italy for such acts of disobedience as giving a media interview. Grillo also kicked out four M5Sers who, at the party’s mega-rally in Rome, had demanded greater openness and a more democratic approach to decision-making in the party. As one critic put it, the notion of e-democracy in Grillo’s party has become “a farce.”

Berlusconi seems to believe that in coming months his Forza Italia will gain enough consensus to push Grillo out of the way, and Forza Italia will come in second. Berlusconi’s fiancée, Francesca Pascale, has lent a hand by making overtures to the Italian gay polity (and hence to younger voters) with ostentatious and well publicized appearances at Arcigay meetings. She and Silvio also hosted the trans Vladimiro Luxuria last week at Arcore, Berlusconi’s villa in Milan.

Money also talks, and shortly after Luxuria was there, Berlusconi hosted at Arcore another Vlad, this one whose family name is Putin. Together these two guests shouted at the media-hip world that Silvio is still a major player who protects gays and transexuals and, by the way, Italy’s trade with Russia, Italy’s principal export market. Trade between the two countries amounts to some \$13 billion a year, and during the first six months of 2013 it rose by almost 16% over the previous year (ISTAT figures).

One who found the Berlusconi opening to Luxuria & Co. welcome was Angelino Alfano, Interior Minister who split with Berlusconi to create a splinter party, the New Center-Right (NCD). This past week Angelino has come down hard on Ignazio Marino, the mayor of Rome, for celebrating the weddings outside of Italy of 16 gay couples. Alfano’s point seems to be to try to appeal to the anti-gay crowd in Berlusconi’s Forza Italia – those horrified at the photos of Silvio embraced between Francesca and Luxuria. When Mayor Marino welcomed the couples to the Campidoglio (the town hall) and officially registered their marriages on Oct. 18, not only did Alfano declare war on the Mayor, but he also had the Rome Prefecture send a written order to Marino to rescind the registrations immediately. The mayor is resisting the order, however, and threatens to take the case to the Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg.

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