

Political winds of Change

Judith Harris (February 03, 2016)



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Change comes slowly in Italian politics -- consider the postwar decades of Christian Democratic stasis while it faced off the old Communist party. But change does come, and a few hints are in the wind these days. No national general election is due, but elections slated between mid-April and mid-June for city administrations in such large cities as Rome, Milan, Bologna, Turin, Naples and Trieste amount to the political equivalent of the American primaries.

What has characterized Italy for the past three years has been its three-way split among the center-left headed by Premier Matteo Renzi; a center-right under Silvio Berlusconi; and an angry upstart party, neither rightist nor leftist, headed by the noisy, exasperating and clever comic actor, Beppe Grillo.



When national general elections were held in February 2013, Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD, led at the time by Pierluigi Bersani) walked away with almost 26% of the vote. Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) tied with the PD at almost 26%. Berlusconi's Partito della Libertà (PdL, or Freedom party, since renamed as Forza Italia) won almost 22%.

To complicate matters, no less than 43 other parties fielded candidates. A few had interesting names like I Love Italy and The Pirates, but of these, 37 failed to claim a single deputy in the 630-seat Chamber of Deputies.

Given the three-way split among the big three, Renzi, Grillo and Berlusconi, to build a coalition is necessary for every reform proposed, including the present vote on civil unions, but to do so is ever more difficult. Renzi's PD now has around 33%, at least in terms of "intentions to vote." Grillo's usually hostile M5S still claims up to 28%. But Berlusconi's renamed Forza Italia, which formerly backed PD reforms, has plunged to between 9% and 11%, depending upon the pollster.

Moreover, during the month of January consensus for the Renzi government shrank from around 31% to 29% (RAI statistics). Even though Renzi tries to show himself as dynamic (he plans to open Milan fashion week later this month), the trend is downhill, and the party he heads is currently split between its more open-minded MPs and its Catholics, angered by the party's on-and-off support for gay adoptions and surrogate motherhood. A tough final vote on this is due within days.

Beppe Grillo has been on the defensive for months. In his his four-day performance as a stage comic at the Ciak Theater in Milan this week, almost 2,000 turned out, at around \$50 and more a head, for his new show, "Grillo vs Grillo." With some overstatement, he declared that he had "always hated leaders, and I ask myself how it was that I could become the leader of the largest party in Italy. For the past five years I've lived with a binary dualism in myself, the personality of the comedian and of the politician. Now I have to purge myself of this dichotomy, and analyze reality."

So is he quitting politics? It is hard to say. For months Grillo's M5S has been troubled by defections, by his attempts to limit the possibility for his MPs to speak to the press, and even by the occasional political scandal. Referring openly to these defections, he shouted: "Only three of us left? That's ok. It's still a great movment, it's a great big Noah's Ark, the Ark of the Hugely Disadapted."

The party's PR guru Gianroberto Casaleggio dismissed the notion that Grillo is leaving politics, saying, "It's only a show." Grillo himself appeared to agree, saying, "It's a joke." (To see a snippet of Grillo's breathless performance, go to: http://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/politica/beppe-grillo-show-a-milano-io-odio-i-leader-ora-devo-purgarmi-_2158376-201602a.)

Silvio Berlusconi is in deep political trouble, if not yet dead and gone. In an interview this week with the rightist "Il Foglio" daily, he boasted that, if the far left in Italy is largely out of business, it is thanks to his entry into politics in 1994. Initially Berlusconi had supported the Renzi government because, he said, "Our idea was to work together toward modernizing Italy through mutually desired reforms. Unfortunately only my party believed in this." Turning to foreign affairs, Berlusconi declared, elder statesman fashion: "Enough of prudence -- a UN coalition is needed to fight our mortal enemy, ISIS. But I do not see sufficient awareness of the gravity of the situation on the part of many Western leaders."

Some pundits here doubt that Forza Italia will even field its own candidates in the elections this Spring. Berlusconi's (somewhat fading) faithful Renato Brunetta denies this, saying that in Milan and Rome their party will present a list. "We will win 20% of the vote," declares Forza Italia Senator Francesco Giro. "In our new video Berlusconi speaks of his political creed, in an amazing testimonial that shows how extraordinarily long-sighted he is, as only true leaders are."

Nevertheless, in the wake of the defections of former Forza Italia aficionados Sandro Bondi and Dennis Verdini, who has formed his own rival political party, others are contemplating quitting Forza Italia. "It's everybody against everybody," as one headline put it this week.



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