

## Italy's Unruly Rulers

by Riccardo Alcaro and Nathalie Tocci

A coalition government that is largely, if not entirely, alien to mainstream party politics has run Italy since June 2018. The coalition is made up of the League, a right-wing anti-immigration party, and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S), which refuses to categorize itself as either left or right wing.

While the two parties did not campaign on a joint agenda, and actually competed in the March 2018 election, a number of important commonalities are present, particularly if one looks at party politics not through the horizontal "left-right" prism but through a vertical "open-closed" one.

Both the League and M5S take pride in fighting the "establishment", broadly construed as mainstream parties, bankers, Eurocrats and intellectuals and the liberal, or open political agenda this establishment supports:

open borders, multiculturalism and European integration. Both have excelled at weaving these themes into a populist narrative of individual and national disempowerment. Both claim to be the true representatives of "the people" against unaccountable elites in Rome, Brussels or Wall Street.

Italy has thus become the first West European country to be ruled by populist forces alone, which thrive in contesting mainstream politics and well-established policies, most notably its commitment to the EU. How did this happen in a country that for decades topped the Euro-enthusiast list?

The modern-day variant of populism, based on a defensive and largely exclusionary understanding of sovereignty, did not flood Italy like a tsunami. It was an incremental process, like a high tide that slowly but inexorably submerged old power constellations. If

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one had to pick a date when all of this started, that would be 24-25 February 2013, when the M5S, a party founded just a couple of years earlier, won a mind-boggling 25 per cent of the votes and one third of parliamentary seats.

The M5S's fabulous electoral showing was directly related to the lack of credibility of the preceding party system, a plethora of mostly small, bickering and ever-changing parties that nonetheless positioned themselves along the traditional left-right political divide, and in which Silvio Berlusconi, for the best part of the previous two decades, was the uncontested kingmaker.

Never strong in the first place, citizen trust in political parties plunged by early 2013. Not only were Italian politicians perceived as incapable of addressing social and economic grievances. They were also deemed utterly disinterested in doing so, prioritizing personal and party profit over that of the collective.

The "antipolitical" wave did not immediately translate into a demand for radically new policies. When a young and energetic leader, Matteo Renzi, emerged from the ranks of the quintessentially mainstream Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) to become prime minister in late February 2014, Italians rewarded his party with an unprecedented 41 per cent of votes during the European Parliament (EP) elections that May.

The secret to Renzi's initial success was his ability to merge a powerful narrative of a radical "change of the guard" with a wide-ranging reform agenda covering

taxes, the labour market, bureaucracy, gay rights as well as the constitutional set-up of the country. Aware that such an ambitious programme would stir opposition from all quarters, Renzi played on popular resentment against the EU's perceived prevarications (on fiscal policy) and lack of solidarity (on migration). Thus, a gap began to widen between Renzi's policies, impeccably in line with Italy's commitment to the EU and the Eurozone, and his rhetoric, whereby the Union was lambasted as an insulated, rigid bureaucracy.

A corollary of this strategy – or perhaps a premise of it – was a highly personalized way of ruling party and country. This not only turned Renzi into the target of a demonization campaign by his political rivals but also nurtured deep frustration within his own PD. As usual, when a politician plays this dangerous game (which, critics say, Renzi had borrowed from Berlusconi), there is no room for recovery after defeat.

When Italians rejected his proposed constitutional overhaul in a national referendum in December 2016, Renzi's political support collapsed. The fact that he managed to remain at the helm of the country even while formally passing the bat to party colleague Paolo Gentiloni only reinforced the perception that he too was more interested in personal power than national welfare.

To his credit, Renzi did bring home important results. The reform of the labour market is probably the high-mark of his tenure. Yet, concrete results are overshadowed by Renzi's leadership style. His legacy lies less in

what his mainstream policies achieved than in what his loosely nationalistic rhetoric triggered, namely the further delegitimization of everything the “establishment” (of which he was eventually perceived to be part) stood for, including the EU. The playing field was thus cleared for parties that expose more genuine nationalist flavours and immaculate anti-establishment credentials.

Meanwhile, the M5S, notably the parliamentary dimension of the party rather than the “movement” per se, used its five-year span in parliament since 2013 to make some policy adjustments. It downplayed its fixation on Internet-enabled direct democracy – a major theme for activists, but little more than a curiosity for voters – and opportunistically refrained from taking clear-cut positions on divisive “left-right” political issues such as migration, pensions or gay rights. Aware of the Italians’ lingering commitment to the euro (more out of fear for the consequences of leaving the common currency than enthusiasm for it), the M5S also set aside its radical proposal for a (consultative) referendum on Eurozone membership.

The strategy paid off. The M5S came out of the March 2018 elections as the largest political force in Italy (32.7 per cent of votes).<sup>1</sup> Yet, the strategy also had its consequences. The M5S soon found that the PD, the demonization of which had defined the M5S’s search

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of the Interior website: *Archivio storico delle elezioni: Camera 04/03/2018, Area Italia*, <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=C&dtel=04/03/2018&tpa=I&tpe=A&lev0=0&levsut0=0&es0=S&ms=S>.

for consensus, was unwilling to join forces as the junior partner in a ruling coalition. This left the M5S with another option: an alliance with the League.

Founded in the late 1980s as a pro-EU force advocating the secession of Italy’s rich North-eastern regions, the Northern League (as it was originally called) underwent a genetic mutation during the 1990s and 2000s. As it joined Berlusconi’s centre-right coalitions in 1994, 2001–6 and 2008–11, the party traded secessionism for federalism while increasingly defining itself as a defender of law-and-order and supporter of Italy’s small and medium enterprises, Christian heritage and national borders.

Notwithstanding these efforts, corruption scandals and the long experience in government with Berlusconi tarnished the League’s reputation. When it won around 4 per cent of the vote in 2013, the party was dismissed as a spent force. The disastrous electoral result led to a change in party leadership, and it is here that a young and ambitious party activist, Matteo Salvini, entered stage.

The new leader was determined to regain the support of a rightist electorate that had felt let down by Berlusconi and that was flirting with the M5S. Salvini doubled down on attacks against the EU and migrants. Taking inspiration from French ultranationalist Marine Le Pen’s National Front, Salvini’s anti-immigration and anti-EU rhetoric morphed into a wider narrative of defence of the people, of national sovereignty and cultural and religious heritage.

By skilfully adopting a communication strategy based on almost uninterrupted exposure to the public via TV, radio and social media, Salvini managed to turn the League into an extreme nationalist movement appealing to voters well beyond the party's traditional North-eastern turf, while also nurturing an image of charismatic leadership.

Under Salvini, the League was reborn, coming second after the M5S in March 2018 with just over 17 per cent of vote.<sup>2</sup> The period of uncertainty that followed the apparently inconclusive election results tested Salvini's ability to manoeuvre his own party on the political chessboard – moving it away from the right/centre-right coalition and putting it squarely into the anti-establishment camp. He gambled, and won big.

Not only did his decision to join the M5S in a coalition government not alienate the League's electorate, it greatly expanded it. Seizing control of the political agenda, Salvini rapidly established himself as Italy's dominant political figure, with opinion polls pointing to the League as Italy's virtual largest party (at around 32 per cent).<sup>3</sup>

Like the M5S, Salvini too had refrained from advocating a complete break from the EU during the campaign. But with both parties catapulted to power, and the EU's fiscal rules standing in the way of their respective economic priorities – a flat tax for the League and universal

national income for the M5S – things may well change between now and the EP elections in May 2019.

Today's million dollar question is how long this government will last and what its future trajectories may be. Notwithstanding their many points of contact, tensions are gradually emerging. Most significantly, Salvini's larger-than-life interpretation of his role as deputy prime minister is making many in the M5S feel uncomfortably overshadowed. Equally embarrassing for the leftist segments of the M5S electorate has been Salvini's uncompromisingly violent stance on migration. But will these tensions erupt and lead to a collapse of government? The likely answer is no.

The M5S, while uncomfortably eyeing its declining electoral support, knows that this may well be its only chance in government. Its members are unlikely to sacrifice their newfound power and status.

The League may have greater incentives to break-up the government and become the uncontested leader of a clear-cut right-wing coalition leading the country to new polls. Yet, such an outcome would not only encounter the likely opposition of Sergio Mattarella, Italy's President of the Republic, it may arguably also run against the interests of Salvini and his League party.

The government has so far enjoyed remarkable public support, with almost 60 per cent of the electorate backing the coalition according to polls.<sup>4</sup> But

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of the Interior website: *Archivio storico delle elezioni: Camera 04/03/2018...*, cit.

<sup>3</sup> Demos, *Stime di voto - dicembre 2018*, <http://www.demos.it/a01556.php>.

<sup>4</sup> Demos, *Stime di voto - dicembre 2018*, cit.;

Italy's economy will continue to bleed<sup>5</sup> and the political capital acquired by Salvini on the migration issue is already fading, meaning that public opinion may start to turn as well. If and when it does, Salvini will find himself in an ideal situation.

Salvini is *de facto* the most powerful leader in government, but formally his party is the junior partner in the coalition with the M5S. When public support is high, Salvini can cash in. When it starts dropping, he can easily blame the situation on its coalition partner, in theory the majority shareholder in government.

The upcoming EP elections in May 2019 are likely to become a key testing ground for the political future of Italy's coalition government. While the above predictions hold on the basis of current polls as well as the government's last minute backtracking on its budget law to avoid an infringement procedure from Brussels, it goes without saying that if the League were to do better than expected in the next EP elections, hubris may kick in and irrationality may prevail.

Salvini could thus jump the gun and catapult a premature end to Italy's populist dominated coalition government. Italy would then be launched into a new unknown, one that will likely see the extreme

right dominate over the traditional centre-right and place Italy into the constellation of nationalist governments emerging across Europe and indeed further afield.

20 December 2018

Ilvo Diamanti, "Sondaggio, la Lega stacca i Cinquestelle: il divario ormai è di sette punti", in *Repubblica*, 19 December 2018, [https://repubblica.it/pwa/generale/2018/12/19/news/sondaggio\\_lega\\_m5s\\_governo\\_pd\\_fi-214665933](https://repubblica.it/pwa/generale/2018/12/19/news/sondaggio_lega_m5s_governo_pd_fi-214665933).

<sup>5</sup> Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), *Italy's Economic Outlook 2018-2019*, 21 November 2018, <https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/223941>.

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