

No solution to Italian government crisis

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Two months after the Italian elections, all attempts to form a majority government have failed. President Sergio Mattarella announced on Monday night that he will try to form a “neutral” caretaker government to prepare new elections by the beginning of next year. If such a government is not supported by the political parties, new elections could take place in autumn or as soon as July.

On May 3, the second attempt to form a government failed when the leadership of the Democratic Party rejected a coalition with the Five Star Movement.

The March 4 election saw the Five Star Movement (M5S) emerge as the single largest party. Party leader Luigi Di Maio first tried to form a coalition with the Lega. The Lega is the strongest force in the right-wing alliance of Silvio Berlusconi, which also includes Forza Italia and the fascist FdI (Brothers of Italy).

However, a coalition of M5S and Lega failed due to the inclusion of Silvio Berlusconi: the Five Star Movement did not want to be part of government involving a man whom they had referred to as the epitome of corruption for years. But Lega leader Matteo Salvini did not want to leave out Berlusconi, because without the entire right-wing alliance backing the coalition he would have to let Luigi Di Maio take the post of prime minister.

As a result, the second option, a coalition of M5S and the Democrats, was explored last week. It failed on Thursday night, when Maurizio Martina, interim PD leader, declared this chapter “over” after a brief party congress.

Former PD chief Matteo Renzi, who vehemently rejects a coalition with the Five Star Movement, had prevailed. In the TV show “Che Tempo Che Fa,” he had strictly excluded participation in a government with the party of Beppe Grillo. He set up a website with the slogan “Senzadime” (without me). PD deputies were encouraged to sign up to make clear that they would

not support such a coalition.

On Thursday evening, interim PD leader Martina said, “It was never our aim to make Di Maio premier.” In fact, in such a coalition government the role of the PD would have only been to secure a majority. The Democrats would have had no claim to the post of prime minister, because the M5S were the strongest party in the general election with 32.7 percent, while the PD received only 18.7 percent.

The Democrats only narrowly prevented an open split in their party on Thursday. But the government crisis remained unresolved. Since the parliamentary elections on March 4, three camps have confronted one another—the Democrats (PD), the right-wing alliance around Silvio Berlusconi and Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement. None of them can command a majority and they are also divided internally.

The reason for this is a deep social crisis, far deeper than five years ago, when eight weeks passed in spring 2013 between the election and the formation of a government. Two years earlier, the drastic cuts in social spending to offset the gigantic budget deficit had begun. The EU had ensured that the Berlusconi government was replaced by the non-elected technocrat government of Mario Monti. Monti began the cuts and “reforms” that continue to this day. In the process, health and social security spending has been cut, the retirement age increased from 58 to 66, and workers’ employment rights eroded.

The 2013 election was the first to take place under conditions of massive social cuts, and it led to a stalemate between the Democrats and Berlusconi’s party. It also saw the first election victory of the Five Star Movement, which acted as a protest party and made the “fight against corruption” its slogan. In its first electoral outing, Grillo’s party received 25.6 percent of the vote. The government crisis was finally ended through forming a grand coalition of the

Democrats with Berlusconi's party, at that time the PdL.

Enrico Letta (PD) was followed by Matteo Renzi (PD) and Paolo Gentiloni (PD) as prime minister—and each of these governments continued the social cuts. Nevertheless, Italy's debt has not decreased to this day; on the contrary, it amounts to €2.3 trillion. The gulf between the ruling parties, above all the Democrats, and the working class has continued to widen.

This chasm between the population and official policy is also the deeper reason for the current government crisis: Whoever comes into government today will be confronted from the beginning with the growing anger and rebellious mood of the working class, and yet under conditions of capitalist crisis they will continue and intensify the cuts and increased military spending.

Italian President Sergio Mattarella is now trying to bring about a government that could at least agree a budget and run business for a while. Commentators are already mocking this as a “bathing” or “beach” government, i.e.. a transitional administration that could run the government over the summer months.

Mattarella could appoint a “government of the president” or a “technical government” led by a nonpartisan “expert,” such as a former president of the Constitutional Court or the State Council, or an EU and banking politician like Mario Monti.

The EU and the stock exchanges are pressing hard on the Italian president. The banking crisis is unresolved, and unless a national budget exists by October and is passed by an incumbent government by the end of the year at the latest, global speculators could attack Italian government bonds, as they did in 2011.

Before the talks on a new government failed, only the Five Star Movement was calling for new elections. M5S feels cheated out of its election victory on March 4, because neither the right-wing alliance nor the Democrats are ready to form a coalition with it. “I never thought it would be easy,” said Di Maio, “but I could not have imagined it was impossible.” The M5S boss has proposed new elections for 24 June and also asked Lega boss Salvini to support this demand.

Salvini, however, sees a chance to bring the Lega to power. The right-wing alliance feels itself bolstered by the outcome of recent regional elections. On April 22, elections were held in Molise, and on April 29 in Friuli

Venezia Giulia, where Lega politician Massimiliano Fedriga, as a candidate of the right-wing alliance, won over 56 percent of the vote, and in Molise, where a Forza Italia politician won.

However, both regional elections are primarily an expression of a clear turn away from politics by voters. Voter turnout was extremely low; it was only 52 percent in Molise and less than 50 percent in Friuli Venezia Giulia.

The president could still try to form a minority government of the right-wing parties, which emerged out of the parliamentary election as the strongest coalition. The prerequisite for this would be that Mattarella receives the commitment of the Democrats to tolerate such a government.

To satisfy the Lega, Mattarella could appoint a leading member of the Lega as prime minister. Giancarlo Giorgetti, the Lega's new parliamentary leader in the House of Representatives, is already under discussion. He is a more diplomatic and less polarizing figure than Matteo Salvini and has good relations with the PD. In the government crisis of 2013, the then President Giorgio Napolitano had already appointed Giorgetti to his “Group of Wise Men,” which prepared the then Letta government.

This would give Italy a government, in the background of which Silvio Berlusconi as well as Matteo Renzi, the leaders of parties that were firmly rejected in the March 4 election, would be pulling the strings. Both the Democrats and Forza Italia were the losers in the general election.



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