

# The Political Situation in Italy

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The Italian political landscape of 2019 presents a complexity that is difficult for Italian analysts to read, and is even more incomprehensible to foreigners. In fact, it is the result of a substantial collapse of the forces that dominated the scene from the 1990s onwards; forces such as the leftist “Democratic Party” and “Forza Italia,” with the subordinate center-right coalition, which proved incapable of understanding and interpreting the changed national and international reality, and, above all, unable to adapt to it.

Adaptation required a substantial metamorphosis in order to follow that of the traditional social blocs, which were disintegrating at an increasing speed. From 2008 onwards, the economic crisis led to the substantial pulverization of the social blocs that had alternatively supported the center-right and center-left governments in the last two decades. To make matters worse the crisis was strongly aggravated by the recessionary policies of Mario Monti’s technocratic government, designed with the sole aim of guaranteeing the interests of the major international financial groups and actually imposed through a sort of “*bloodless coup*,” supported, if not directed, by France and Germany.

Matteo Renzi had perceived the situation and tried to transform the PD from a left-wing party into a sort of “Whale Party,” modelled on the old Christian Democratic Party, in whose ranks Renzi himself was trained in his youth. This was a party capable of merging all the components and contradictions of Italian society and forcing them to coexist. It represented their differing interests and marginalized de

facto the most prominent right and left forces, putting them in sterile extremist positions.

The attempt failed, however, because of strong opposition from within the PD itself, and due to a host of political mistakes made by Renzi, causing him to lose the popular support he initially enjoyed. After him, the Democratic Party made a mess of itself, espousing causes that do not belong to the tradition of the Italian left, but rather to a sort of libertarian and liberal movement of radical origin, such as the civil rights of minorities, especially LGBT, the rights of immigrants and, above all, a Europeanism increasingly inclined to the dictates of Brussels. There was a total loss of contact with the world of work and production, a sort of chic radicalism, which pushed the “*Dems*” away from the people, putting them in a sort of snobbish Indian reservation.

As for the right, the explanation is even simpler. Silvio Berlusconi is now old, dogged by health concerns and a host of personal issues. “Forza Italia” has always been a “one-man party,” but this man alone is no longer able to hold the tiller; and more importantly, is apparently no longer able to read the current reality. He is surrounded by a void, aggravated by the outflow of many who fear being overwhelmed by the inevitable “Forza Italia” syncopation. This melancholic decline will become an electoral meltdown when Berlusconi is no longer willing or able to expose himself. On the right, Giorgia Meloni’s “Brothers of Italy,” minor heirs of what remains of the tradition of the Italian Social Movement and then the National Alliance, are now freed from Berlusconi’s protection, and increasingly cozying up to Matteo Salvini’s League.

Two “new” political forces filled the ensuing vacuum: the “League” of Matteo Salvini and the “Five Star Movement.” The “League” can in fact be considered a new movement, although rooted in the historic par-

ty of Umberto Bossi, from which it inherited the strong electoral base in northern Italy, particularly in the regions of Lombardy and Veneto. However, under the leadership of Salvini it has undergone a profound change. With the appeals for autonomy muted - which still remain in Veneto and Lombardy - the “League” has turned into a national movement riding on the growing social discontent of the lower middle classes, above all on issues such as immigration, employment, the tax burden and, ultimately, public order.

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According to the surveys, its growth curve is remarkable. However, it suffers from two very specific handicaps. First of all, the obligatory government alliance with the “Five Star Movement” has forced the “League” to accept welfare policies, in particular the burdensome “Citizenship Income,” which are viewed with little sympathy by its electorate. It has also had to give up, or at least postpone, the introduction of the flat tax, a much awaited tax policy by the productive classes, which constitute the backbone of its electoral strength.

As Minister of the Interior, Salvini managed to compensate for these disappointing developments by pushing his foot harder on the accelerator on issues relating to public order and the fight against illegal immigration. However, it should be verified whether, in the medium term, these requests could really guarantee the “League” broad and widespread support, in the absence of concrete answers on its electorate’s much-loved economic issues. Another problem is precisely the growth in stature of Matteo Salvini himself, who is increasingly seen as being a man alone at the helm, in the collective imagination at least.

Strong leadership is characteristic and, in part, a chronic illness of the forces of Italy’s right wing. It produces results in the short term which, however, prove to be self-defeating in the long run. The “League” is not a classical right-wing party and Sal-

vini himself does not come from that world. Rather we could describe it as a populist movement capable of attracting support from the most diverse sectors of society. However, the excessive polarization on issues of immigration and public order, together with Salvini’s increasingly unquestioned leadership, seem to attract right-wingers like the “Brothers of Italy” and the remains of the Berlusconi party to the “League,” while on the other hand risking these groups losing support from other social blocs.

As for the “Five Star Movement,” being a virtual and media phenomenon, built “in vitro” by the Casaleggio/Grillo double act, means it fluctuates sharply regarding real support. Even for the lack of a managerial and administrative class so far demonstrated, and for the total absence of true leadership. Furthermore, the policies imposed on the Conte Government have a clear welfare matrix, and while they enjoy strong support in certain areas of “Mezzogiorno” (southern Italy), they are undoubtedly lacking in the most productive areas of the north and the centre.

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On the other hand, the “M5S” is perpetually suspended between being a relatively chaotic movement with the radical left-wing leanings of some of its top representatives - such as the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Roberto Fico - and a certain conservative moderatism represented by the leader and Minister of Economic Development, Luigi Di Maio. In fact, it remains a hard one to assess, as it does not represent real social interest blocs. It has simply exploited the disintegration and crisis of traditional political forces to capture broad support off the back of a growing discomfort and broad mistrust of Italians in the institutions. But it is a shaky support, and therefore difficult to condense and maintain. The “M5S,” in essence, and beyond pockets of marginalization in the South, has no hold on defined so-

cial blocs, but only on the individual discomfort of individual citizens, the type of support more likely to evaporate at the blink of an eye.

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It is clear that the game is currently being played between the two government allies, which are participating in an increasingly quarrelsome and difficult cohabitation. However, an immediate return to the polls is complex, and the Italian President Mattarella does not seem very keen. And then there is the draft-

ing of the Financial Planning Document, a particularly delicate issue given the increasingly virulent pressure from Brussels.

A government crisis could, therefore, easily lead to a technocratic cabinet, similar to Monti's, perhaps with Cottarelli as leader or, according to many, Mario Draghi. This, however, would be a devastating solution both for the “League” and for “M5S,” who would lose considerable support across the country, especially among those social blocs that would be mortally wounded by a technocratic government, controlled under conditions set by the European Union. Furthermore, the economic indicators show signs of recovery in the Italian system in many sectors, particularly exports; a recovery that a government crisis could nullify. This difficult cohabitation is therefore likely to continue to be an unavoidable option, at least until the spring of 2020, by when, in a political scenario as fluid as Italy's, we could have been witness to further, unpredictable metamorphoses.