

# Italian parties endeavor to form a government

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Italy's leading parties are endeavoring to form an effective government to continue the unpopular austerity of former premier Mario Monti, after the parliamentary elections of February 24 and 25.

The election result was a slap in the face to Monti's policies. The center-left coalition led by Pier Luigi Bersani and the electoral list of Mario Monti, which both called for a continuation of the previous austerity policies, were only able to gain 40 percent of the vote. Nearly 30 percent of voters supported the center-right coalition of Silvio Berlusconi, and 25 percent supported the Five Star Movement (SSM) of Beppe Grillo, both of which waged campaigns against Monti's austerity measures and the European Union.

Bersani does have a majority in the House of Deputies, because Italian electoral law awards the strongest alliance 54 percent of seats. In the Senate, however, Bersani is dependent on support from Grillo or Berlusconi in order to form a government with a working majority.

Currently every conceivable government variation is up for discussion: a grand coalition of the Bersani and the Berlusconi camp, a coalition between Bersani and the Five Star Movement, a minority government headed by Bersani, supported by some or all of the "Grillini", or a technocrat government supported by all parties. The final scenario is a complete breakdown of negotiations and early elections.

The government now lies in the hands of 87-year-old president Giorgio Napolitano. He must conduct talks with all parties and instruct the leading candidates to appoint a government. Napolitano's term ends in April, and parliament must elect a new head of state in early May. A new government must be formed in the meantime, or new elections are required.

Napolitano, a member of the Italian Communist Party from 1945 until its dissolution in 1991, supports the European Union (EU) and its austerity program. In November 2011 he appointed Mario Monti head of a technocrat government and backed him in the following months. Monti's austerity program has had devastating

effects on the Italian population: youth unemployment is now at 39 percent, many retirees live in abject poverty, social benefits have been drastically reduced, and worker's rights massively undermined.

Now Napolitano is seeking to ensure that the brutal austerity measures will continue. He can, in principle, rely on the support of all parties, including the Five Star Movement. The rivalries and tactical differences between political camps are so deep, however, that the formation of a government may fail anyway.

Immediately after the election, Silvio Berlusconi was the first to call for the formation of a grand coalition with Bersani's Democratic Party. It is clear that Berlusconi's attacks on austerity and the European Union during the election campaign were aimed at gaining votes. As prime minister, Berlusconi supported the policy of the EU for years.

The main concern of the 76-year old multi-billionaire is to escape the reach of the courts. In addition to various counts of sex offenses and tax fraud, the judiciary is also investigating several counts of bribery of MPs by the former prime minister. In 2008 he allegedly paid the senator Sergio De Gregorio three million euros to change camps and thus topple the former government led by Romano Prodi.

Bersani immediately turned down Berlusconi's coalition offer, evidently fearing that the Democrats will lose their last vestige of credibility if they form a government with the tycoon.

There are voices in the Democratic Party, however, urging a grand coalition with Berlusconi. Among them is the 38-year-old mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, who was defeated in primary elections held last fall by Bersani's Democrats.

Renzi said he would consider taking over as premier "if the Democratic Party went to Giorgio Napolitano with several names of possible candidates to overcome the stalemate, which is not good for the country." Heading a grand coalition, which could also include Grillo or Berlusconi, would be "a real challenge" for him, Renzi

said.

In the meantime, Bersani is seeking support from the 5SM. Beppe Grillo's movement is represented in the two houses of parliament with 160 deputies, most of whom have no political experience. They embody a layer of young, well-educated members of the middle class. Eighty-eight percent of them are university graduates, compared to 67 percent in the rest of the House. Their average age is 37—well below the average age of 54 in the House of Representatives and 57 in the Senate.

Grillo himself has indicated that the Five Star fraction could provide some support for a minority government. He said the Five Star Movement would support or reject the measures of the new government step by step. "We are not against the whole world. We will look at every individual reform and law", he said.

The movement has adopted a similar approach in Sicily after its big vote in elections on the island last October. The regional president, Rosario Crocetta of the Democratic Party, is only able to govern with the support of "Grillini". He receives their support on virtually every substantive issue discussed in parliament. Crocetta said the "Grillini" were young, pragmatic people with the will to change, and one could work with them very well.

There is also growing pressure from followers of Grillo to participate in a Democratic administration. Nobel Prize winner Dario Fo, who actively supports Grillo, has publicly called upon him to cooperate with Bersani. Twenty-four-year-old Viola Tesi, who voted for Grillo, is collecting signatures via the internet for an open letter, calling for a coalition with Bersani.

"I have voted for you, now please be responsible", the appeal read. She received 120,000 supporting signatures.

Grillo himself, however, has rejected such a coalition. He abruptly turned down Bersani's advances, describing him as "talking dead". At the first meeting of Five Star deputies in Rome, Grillo spoke instead in favor of a government of technocrats. "When a technical government is proposed we will think about it, but we stand by our 'no' to a government of political parties," he said.

Vito Crimi, the leader of the 5SM group in the Senate, confirmed this line. "Our group in the Senate and the Chamber will consider all proposals that provide an alternative to a government of political parties," he said. Asked if this also applies to a second government led by Monti, he replied: "We will consider whatever choice Napolitano comes to".

The Grillo movement was able to achieve the status of

strongest party due to its criticisms of the austerity measures imposed by the Monti government. The fact that they are now considering to support a refurbished Monti government or another technocratic regime reveals the hollowness of Grillo's agitation.

Grillo attacks the corruption of the old parties and the state apparatus from the standpoint of the petty bourgeois and small businessman who wants a larger share of the cake. He supports the drastic austerity measures that are destroying the country's social system and plunging large sections of the population into poverty and misery—sometimes embellished with ecological arguments.

The program of the 5SM is quite blunt, advocating the "reduction of public debt by strong austerity measures". Since the election, Grillo has spoken out even more clearly in favor of a continuation of austerity measures. He told the German magazine Focus on Saturday: "We are overwhelmed—not by the euro, but by our debt. If the interest amounts to hundreds of billions of euros a year, we're dead. There is no alternative".

The unexpected result of the Italian election has revealed the enormous tensions and social upheaval in Italy and throughout Europe. The differences between the parties represented in the new parliament remain minimal, however. Basically, all of them are prepared to work with one another—that also applies to the Grillini.

Only an independent movement of the working class fighting for a socialist program can overcome the social crisis and provide a progressive answer.



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