

As government crisis drags on

Italian president appoints expert commissions

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4 April 2013

The ruling class in Italy is desperately seeking to override the election result of February 25 and develop a political mechanism to continue the austerity policies that were decisively rejected by the electorate. There is no sign, however, of an end to the political crisis.

On Tuesday, President Giorgio Napolitano appointed two commissions of experts to explore ways out of the crisis. The appointment of such commissions is not covered by the country's constitution.

Earlier, the head of the Democratic Party (PD), Pier Luigi Bersani, failed to form a government. Bersani was unable to convince both the right-wing camp led by former premier Silvio Berlusconi and the Five Star Movement led by Beppe Grillo to express their confidence in a minority government led by the PD. Just before the Easter break, Bersani threw in the towel and returned his mandate.

President Napolitano responded to Bersani's failure by announcing he wished to quit his post a full six weeks before the official end of his term. A new president would be able to call new elections. According to the Italian constitution, Napolitano, whose term of office ends on May 15, is not permitted to call such elections.

The *Corriere della Sera* reported that Napolitano complained he was enduring the worst period he had ever experienced. He had been unable to find a single point of agreement between the political camps and confronted an "insuperable wall ranging from right to left," the newspaper wrote.

The election of a new president, however, poses the same problems as the election of a new government. To elect a new president, at least two of the three main blocks in parliament must decide on a common candidate to achieve the necessary majority. Otherwise, the country would lack not only an elected government, but also a head of state.

A number of newspapers noted that it was the head of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, who persuaded the 87-year-old president to remain at his post for the remaining six weeks in order to avoid new elections in the immediate future.

Financial circles were apparently fearful that new elections could negatively affect the markets. *Forbes* commented: "While sovereign bond yields have retreated after the Cypriot scare, they could spike dramatically if Italian President Giorgio Napolitano's risky plan to form a government fails, or if new elections are unexpectedly called."

The European Union and the European financial markets insist that any new government in Italy continue the path of austerity policies. Some weeks ago, German EU Commissioner Günther Oettinger wrote in *Handelsblatt*: "Italy has promised the EU to reduce its budget deficit. The promise also applies to the new government."

On Good Friday, Napolitano announced he would stay in office until the end of his term and nominate two commissions. He said he wanted to continue "up to the last day" and "at least try to create conditions aimed at easing the political situation, which has been hardened by irreconcilable positions."

The two commissions, dubbed the "council of wise men", consist of lawyers, politicians, bankers and senior government officials. Their job is to find a way to press ahead with the austerity course adopted by the previous prime minister, Mario Monti, while seeking reforms to the voting system that can lead to clearer results.

Their role is also to permit the camps of Bersani and Berlusconi, which could not previously agree on a government, to save face and agree a program to be implemented either by a grand coalition or a technocratic government supported by one of the rival camps.

One member of the "council of wise men", Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Mario Mauro, commented on its aim: "In recent weeks, the PDL [Berlusconi's party] has repeatedly stated that several program points of his party—especially on economic issues—are very similar to those of the PD. Now the wise men have to determine whether this is true, and what the parameters of the alleged affinity are."

A commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* compared the

Italian “wise men” to the Hartz Commission, which was responsible for drawing up radical labour market reforms in Germany ten years ago. These reforms were also worked out by experts and only afterwards agreed upon and legitimized by parliament.

The most prominent member of the commission concerned with new electoral law is Valerio Onida, the former president of the constitutional court. He is also considered to be a leading contender to succeed Napolitano as head of state.

Commentators describe Onida as “a typical representative of the enlightened Milanese bourgeoisie”. He taught constitutional law at the University of Milan and was a member of the team of experts who drew up the 2006 government program of Romano Prodi.

Prodi was forced to resign after just two years in office following a groundswell of popular resistance to his pro-business program.

Other members of this commission are Senator Gaetano Quagliariello for the PDL and Judge Luciano Violante for the PD.

The second commission, which is tasked with drawing up economic policy, includes a member of the Presidium of the Bank of Italy, Salvatore Rossi. Other members include Enrico Giovannini, president of the Italian statistics office Istat, and Giovanni Pitruzzella, head of the Italian Competition Authority. The remaining members are Giancarlo Giorgetti (PDL) and Filippo Bubbico (PD), as well as Monti’s European minister, Enzo Moavero Milanesi.

The ten “wise men” are evidently mandated to work closely with both the former Monti government and all parliamentary factions. Monti, who led a non-elected “technocratic” government that took office in November 2011, remains acting prime minister despite his resignation late last year and devastating defeat in the February election.

Napolitano regards Monti as the only stable factor capable of enforcing the diktats of the financial markets against the population. He said: “It cannot escape the attention of Italian and international opinion that there is one pole of security in the current situation of our country: the functioning of the government in office, which has not resigned and which has not lost the trust of parliament. This government has announced urgent measures for the economy, and will undertake them—with the consent of European institutions.”

Napolitano’s commissions have the full support of Bersani’s PD, which criticised only the absence of female members, and Monti’s Scelta Civica. Both fear a massive loss of votes in fresh elections.

For his part, Berlusconi gave Napolitano an ultimatum. Speaking Tuesday from his country home in Milan, where he had summoned his aides for an emergency meeting, he

declared that the “wise men” had a maximum of 72 hours, after which the PDL “will end this chapter with uproar.”

The *Huffington Post* quoted Berlusconi as saying: “Enough is enough, we cannot allow ourselves to be roasted over a slow fire and watch how they choose one of their own in the Quirinal [palace of the president].” Berlusconi threatened to peremptorily withdraw the two advisers of his party from the expert commission to force Napolitano to resume consultations with the parties.

Berlusconi is eager to take up an official post as soon as possible in order to gain immunity in his numerous lawsuits. He has called upon his party to participate in a grand coalition or new elections.

Beppe Grillo, who ran as an anti-establishment populist in the February election and won over 25 percent of the vote, commented on the two commissions, declaring that they were “the best solution at the moment.” At the same time, he denounced them as “imaginary intermediators” and “geriatric nurses of democracy.”

Grillo is fighting against currents in his own camp that are willing to collaborate with Bersani under certain circumstances. The movement’s faction leader in the Senate, Vito Crimi, wrote on Facebook that it was “better to have a Bersani government without majority support on a day-to-day basis than further rule by Monti.”

Grillo said, “Bersani is no better than Monti, he’s just the same as Monti, adopting his combine harvester-type economic policies.”

Grillo currently has the best chance in new elections if they are quickly held. This is why the two expert commissions are evidently seeking to create the conditions for a broad coalition excluding him.

This impression was recently reinforced by speculation that Matteo Renzi, the mayor of Florence, could replace Bersani as the PD’s leading candidate. Polls indicate he is more popular with voters than Bersani. Following the February elections, Renzi spoke out clearly for a grand coalition with Berlusconi’s PDL.

Currently, however, no solution to the political crisis is in sight. This has less to do with the disunity of the different political camps than the deep hostility of broad layers of the population to the austerity measures dictated by the EU.



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