

Presidential vote heightens political crisis in Italy

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On Friday, after two days of voting and four unsuccessful ballots, Italy still had no successor to President Giorgio Napolitano, whose term of office expires on May 15.

The president has a crucial role to play in overcoming the current political crisis. Only he can appoint the head of government or schedule new elections.

Since the general election eight weeks ago, Napolitano has failed to find a prime minister with a majority capable of forming a government, and he is no longer able to dissolve parliament before the end of his term in office. Italy is threatened with political paralysis if a successor cannot be found in the near future.

In the fourth round of voting, in which a simple majority of the 1,007 electors suffices, Romano Prodi, former head of government and former president of the European Commission, failed to win sufficient votes. Prodi received only 395 of the 521 votes required. He was nominated by the centre-left coalition made up of the Democratic Party (PD) and Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (SEL).

The centre-left coalition commands 498 representatives in the electoral body comprising both houses of parliament and regional deputies. Of these, more than 100 have abandoned their leader, Democratic Party head Pier Luigi Bersani, and voted for other candidates.

Prodi received no votes from the Scelta Civica (Civic Election) alliance of incumbent Prime Minister Mario Monti or from the Five Star Movement of comedian Beppe Grillo. Both are close to Prodi. Monti was an EU commissioner when Prodi headed the EU Commission. In an online poll, the Five Star Movement chose Prodi as one of its ten favoured candidates for president.

Prodi, like no other Italian politician, stands for the

course of fiscal austerity and social deprivation that has been followed by the Monti government. Prodi's second government was forced to resign prematurely in 2008 because its austerity measures and support for the war in Afghanistan and the construction of American military bases met with massive resistance.

The centre-right coalition of Silvio Berlusconi has latterly regarded Prodi as its nemesis. Prodi twice won elections against Berlusconi, and his elevation to president could cause political difficulties for the media billionaire. The deputies in the Berlusconi camp pointedly absented themselves from the fourth ballot, while fascist groups demonstrated against Prodi in front of parliament.

The election of the president, like the previous general election, is marked by deep divisions and bitter power struggles within the ruling elite. The fierceness of the conflict, however, stands in inverse proportion to the actual political differences. On the basic question of continuing austerity measures at the expense of the working class, all agree—including Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. The power struggles revolve around influence and sinecures, and indirectly reflect the sharp social tensions in Italian society.

The various establishment political camps are not only fighting against each other, they are tearing themselves apart. Above all, the Democratic Party, which was created in 2007 through a merger of the Democratic Left, a successor organization to the Communist Party, and the Christian Democratic Margherita, is deeply divided.

In the first round, Bersani's attempt to find a common presidential candidate with Berlusconi failed due to resistance from deputies of both camps. At the last minute, and apparently without consulting his own party, Bersani had agreed with Berlusconi to back

80-year-old Franco Marini.

Although Marini is a member of Bersani's Democratic Party, he originally comes from the Christian Democratic camp. From the 1950s, he was a member of the ruling Christian Democrats (DC). Between 1985 and 1991, he headed the DC-linked Italian Confederation of Trade Unions (CISL). In 1997, he became the leader of the Popular Party (PPI), a successor to the DC, which joined the Democrats in 2007 as part of the Margherita.

Marini had sought the office of president in 1999, but at that time had to defer to former central banker Carlo Azeglio Ciampi. From 2006 to 2008, he was president of the Italian Senate.

Agreement on Marini was regarded as a signal for cooperation between Berlusconi's centre-right and Bersani's centre-left alliances. According to unconfirmed media reports, Berlusconi is said to have agreed to support a centre-left government in return for the election of a presidential candidate acceptable to him.

In the first round, Berlusconi's People of Freedom (PdL) and its Northern League ally voted unanimously for Marini. Nevertheless, they fell short of the required two-thirds majority of 672 votes. It is estimated that 200 of the 436 Democrats broke ranks with Bersani and voted against Marini.

Many did so because they regard an alliance with Berlusconi, who is burdened with lawsuits and scandals, as political suicide. The 38-year-old mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, who had previously advocated political cooperation with Berlusconi, was pushed forward as the spokesman for Marini's opponents.

Prior to the vote, Renzi called Marini a "man of the last century" who enjoys no international reputation. He accused Bersani of having no regard for the welfare of Italy and being concerned only with his own career. Of course, Renzi was driven by his own career concerns.

Politically, Renzi has little to hold up against Marini. Renzi too came from the Christian Democratic PPI. However, Renzi now sees an opportunity to replace Bersani as the leading candidate of the Democrats should it come to fresh elections.

In the last general election, he had tried to become the Democrats' lead candidate, but was defeated by Bersani in the primaries. He now refuses to cooperate

with Berlusconi because a Bersani-Berlusconi alliance would postpone fresh elections.

Bersani's ally Nichi Vendola of the SEL also spoke out against Marini. His election would spell the end of the alliance with the Democrats, Vendola said. The SEL deputies finally voted for Stefano Radotà, the candidate of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement.

The 79-year-old law professor Radotà is only a few months younger than Marini, and like Marini can look back on a long political history. From 1979 to 1994 he sat in parliament as an independent candidate of the Communist Party and its successor organizations. Later, he was in charge of Italy's data protection office. With 240 votes on the first ballot, Radotà received significantly more votes than the 162 commanded by the Five Star Movement.

Beppe Grillo is now trying to attract more Democratic Party deputies to support Radotà. Observers interpret this as an attempt to build a bridge to the Democrats, with whom Grillo has so far refused to cooperate.

Further ballots will be held this Saturday, but the outcome remains in doubt. After his defeat in the first round, Marini is regarded as burned out, and it is not clear whether Prodi's candidacy can be maintained. Prodi himself, who is working for the UN in the Malian war zone, has so far not expressed his intentions.

One thing is certain: the interests of the Italian working class find no expression in the cut and thrust behind the scenes that is accompanying the presidential election. The current struggle for new political combinations and power blocks is taking place entirely within the ruling elite.



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