

Italy: Napolitano re-elected as president

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A joint session of the Italian parliament ended nearly a weeklong deadlock Saturday by electing 87-year-old Giorgio Napolitano to another term as president, with 739 out of 1,007 votes cast for his reelection.

Napolitano received the required majority of votes in the sixth ballot following the exclusion of a number of other candidates in previous ballots characterised by fierce infighting between and within the main political camps. The incumbent president, whose term of office expires on May 15, agreed to accept reelection following fervent appeals from representatives of the centre-left camp led by Pier Luigi Bersani, the centre-right camp of Silvio Berlusconi and the electoral alliance headed by the interim prime minister, Mario Monti.

Napolitano, whose political career began in the Communist Party at the end of the Second World War, has played a central role in the enforcement of austerity policies, which received a massive thumbs-down from voters in the parliamentary elections of February 25. It was Napolitano who gave the seal of approval to the replacement of Berlusconi by Monti at the head of a technocratic government in November 2011. Monti's government went on to vigourously implement the latest round of EU-dictated austerity measures.

It is generally assumed that Napolitano made his agreement to a further term as president conditional on cooperation between Berlusconi's People of Freedom (PdL) and the Democratic Party (PD) on forming a new government. The two camps had been unable to form a government during the past eight weeks due to resistance within the Democratic Party to further collaboration with Berlusconi.

If Napolitano's demand is met, Italian politics will be dominated by the same policies despite the massive vote against austerity in the parliamentary elections in February. Both Berlusconi and Bersani had given their support to the Monti government until Berlusconi

withdrew his backing late last year due to his involvement in several court cases.

The precise form of a new version of the previous government remains unclear. One possibility is another technocrat government led by an independent jurist or financial expert. Following his participation in the February election as head of his own electoral alliance, Monti himself is no longer eligible to head such a government of "experts."

Also possible is a government headed by a nominee of the Democratic Party, either in a coalition with Berlusconi or based on his support. Pier Luigi Bersani resigned as PD chairman on Friday following the failure of two of his presidential nominees to win sufficient support from the legislators of his own party.

There are several candidates for the top government post within the deeply divided Democratic Party. In particular, the 38-year-old mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, has made no secret of his ambitions.

The Five-Star Movement led by the comedian Beppe Grillo, which won 25 percent of the vote and surprisingly emerged as the strongest single party in the parliamentary elections, has responded to the reelection of Napolitano with loud protests. His MPs responded to the election with catcalls and boos and organised a demonstration in front of Parliament.

Grillo condemned the election on his blog as a "coup" by the political caste seeking to save itself from destruction, and called for a mass demonstration by millions in Rome.

Grillo has so far refused to cooperate with the Democrats or Berlusconi in the formation of a government, but made a number of overtures to the centre-left camp during the presidential election.

While the other parties selected and then voted down one candidate after another, the Five-Star Movement remained faithful to its candidate Stefano Rodotà, with Grillo repeatedly urging the other parties to vote for

him. The 79-year-old Rodotà is a professor of law who enjoys considerable support, especially in the ranks of the Democratic Party and its allies. For 15 years, he represented the Communist Party and its successor organisations in the House of Representatives.

The election of Rodotà that seemed quite possible after the failure of several other candidates, would have paved the way for cooperation between the Five-Star Movement and a wing of the Democratic Party and its allied party, Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (SEL), which publicly called for Rodotà's election.

Grillo was able to win many votes in the general election based on his violent tirades against the political system and his focus on the widespread corruption prevalent in the ranks of the geriatric political caste in Rome, which blocks the careers of many ambitious younger careerists. Grillo has no objection to the policy of budgetary consolidation and associated social cuts. On the contrary, he believes that a younger generation of untested politicians could apply such measures much more effectively.

Napolitano's reelection can only serve as a short-term palliative to the political crisis in Italy. It can only be regarded as a temporary solution. Most observers believe that it is highly unlikely the 87-year-old will remain a further seven years in office and expect him to resign as soon as there is any sign of political stability.

The continuation of the current austerity policy by a government supported by Berlusconi and the Democrats will merely exacerbate the social and political crisis in Italy, which finds itself in deep recession. Fierce social confrontations and class struggles will be the inevitable result.



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