

Italian parliament adopts new election law

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Italy's parliament adopted an electoral reform in its fourth reading on Monday that will give the government more freedom to act independently of the will of the electorate. The Senate, Italy's second chamber, had already backed the law in January.

As with the previous electoral reform, which was declared to be in breach of the constitution by the Supreme Court in 2013, the new law guarantees the largest party a parliamentary majority in the lower house, even if its result is well below 50 percent of the vote. The Senate, where the distribution of seats corresponds more directly to the election result, and which has to date formed a check on power, will be practically abolished.

The election law is among the most important projects of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (Democratic Party, DP). It is aimed at giving his government and future administrations a stable majority so as to force through strict austerity measures, deregulate the labour market and strengthen the military. It is clearly a step towards dictatorial forms of rule.

All four votes in parliament were declared to be votes of confidence in Renzi in order to keep the number of dissenters in his own ranks low. In the fourth vote, 334 voted in favour and 61 against. The opposition parties had earlier left parliament in protest.

The new election law will come into force on July 1, 2016. It contains a 3 percent hurdle for smaller parties and is a distorted form of proportional representation. If a party achieves 40 percent of the vote, it obtains a government bonus of 15 percent, thereby establishing an absolute majority of 340 seats in the 630-seat parliament. The remaining seats will be distributed in line with the votes obtained.

If no party reaches 40 percent, a second round of voting between the two strongest parties takes place. The victor then receives 340 seats, even if they did not obtain 30 percent of the vote in the first round.

The previous election law contained a similar regulation. The strongest coalition of parties, not a single party as in the new law, obtained a government bonus to secure a majority. Silvio Berlusconi introduced this to consolidate his majority. It was termed *porcellum*, or "pigs law".

As Berlusconi's power waned, the DP benefited from *porcellum*. Renzi, who took over from Enrico Letta in February 2014 without a vote by the electorate, can rely on a stable majority in parliament, even though his party won only 25.4 percent of the vote at the last election.

At the end of 2013, Italy's highest court declared *porcellum* to be in violation of the constitution because it distorted the will of the electorate too much. The court also raised concerns over the rigidity of the order on party lists, thanks to which the parties and not the voters were able to determine who entered parliament.

On this second question, the new *Italicum* election law makes concessions to the constitution. The parties are only permitted to determine the top position on their lists, while the voters have the opportunity to cast two votes in order to determine the order of candidates on the list.

Alongside *Italicum* the Renzi government is reforming the Senate, which is being eliminated as an upper house with equal powers to act as a check of parliament. In future, it will only exist as a regional representative body with consultative powers. The number of senators will be reduced from 315 to 100. They will no longer be directly elected, but appointed by regional governments. In addition, there are senators appointed for life and those named by the president.

Since Renzi has no majority in the existing Senate, he was only able to pass the electoral reform and the Senate reform with the support of Berlusconi's right-wing opposition. This was the point of the so-called Nazereno pact concluded last year by Renzi and

Berlusconi. The latter is hoping to make a political comeback and therefore assisted Renzi to pass both reforms in the Senate.

The Nazereno pact subsequently broke down because Renzi had Sergio Matarella elected as Italian president against the wishes of Berlusconi. Since then, deputies of Berlusconi's Forza Italia have expressed strong vocal opposition to Renzi. Forza Italia parliamentary fraction leader Renato Brunetta denounced *Italicum* last week as "Renziist fascism."

Tensions are also mounting within Renzi's party, after he threw 10 critical deputies out of the constitutional committee in parliament. Prominent party members from the former Communist Party such as Guglielmo Epifani, Pier Luigi Bersani and Gianni Cuperlo, along with Renzi's predecessor Enrico Letta, remained absent from part of the vote in protest. Renzi obtained the necessary majority through the support of several smaller parties, including Mario Monti's Scelta Civica (Citizens' Vote) and the Aerea Popolare group.

The SEL Party (Left, ecology, freedom), which initially backed Renzi, the Five Star Movement of Beppe Grillo and Berlusconi's party are pressing for a referendum against the electoral reform.

SEL leader Nichi Vendola stated that the "servile subordination of the legislative power to the executive" was simply unacceptable. During Berlusconi's time, they had been "up in arms when much less was involved."

The theatrical posturing of the opposition on the left and right involves nothing principled. They are merely concerned with defending their privileges, which they see as threatened by the new election law. The shifting alliances and power struggles recall the intrigues and conspiracies at the time of the Borgias. They are miles away from the real daily lives of the population.

The extreme right-wing Lega Nord has been the main beneficiary from the controversy surrounding the law thus far. In two new polls by Ipsos and IX, the party has obtained between 13 and 14 percent support. This represents a trebling of their vote since the 2013 parliamentary election. Originally campaigning for the separation of the wealthier northern regions, the Lega Nord is seeking to profit from the crisis under its new leader Matteo Salvini and build a national party on the basis of racism, hostility to the EU and support for authoritarian forms of rule.



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