

# Setback for ruling Democratic Party in Italian municipal elections

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Italy's municipal elections concluded June 5 with a defeat for the Democratic Party (PD) of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. In the capital, Rome, it is Virginia Raggi of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement and not the PD candidate Roberto Giachetti, who has the best chance of becoming mayor.

In the four most important cities, Rome, Milan, Turin and Naples, the PD candidate failed to be elected in the first round. In six of the seven largest cities where mayors were to be elected, run-offs will be held June 19 because no candidate achieved the necessary majority of 50 percent of the vote plus one. Around 13 million voters were eligible to go to the polls on Sunday in 1,274 municipalities.

The elections were seen as a barometer for the policies of the Renzi government. The prime minister and PD chair responded to the economic crisis with sharp attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class. Like his social-democratic counterpart and friend in France, Manuel Valls, Renzi is in the process of deregulating the labour market in Italy and destroying all of the social gains of the post-World War II period. At the same time, the government is strengthening the state apparatus and preparing for a new military intervention in Libya.

Renzi's "Jobs Act" labour market reform, pension reform, the fiscal stability law, and the "Buona Scuola" education reform have repeatedly provoked angry protests by workers and strikes by school and university students. But because the trade unions and pseudo-left groups prop up the Renzi government, this social resistance finds no progressive political expression.

The poor results for PD candidates and the gains made by Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) are a clear sign of dissatisfaction with the Renzi government. Raggi (M5S) obtained 35.3 percent of the vote in Rome, while the PD candidate Giachetti captured just 25 percent. He was followed by the fascist Fratelli d'Italia candidate with almost 21 percent. Silvio Berlusconi's candidate, the businessman and billionaire Alfio Marchini, secured 11 percent.

The low voter turnout is also a sign of dissatisfaction. Non-voters comprised almost everywhere the largest group. Nationally, an average of 62 percent of voters went to the polls, 5 percent less than the previous comparable election. In the largest cities, barely one in two voted. In Naples, turnout was

54 percent, almost 55 percent in Milan, and 57 percent in Rome and Turin.

Since the introduction of direct mayoral elections in 1993, Rome was considered a stronghold for the centre-left. Until the crisis of 2008, Francesco Rutelli from the Greens and Walter Veltroni from the Democratici di Sinistra (Democratic Left) party, the successor to the Italian Communist Party (CPI), held office. In 2008, Berlusconi replaced the national government of Romano Prodi, in which along with the Democrats, Rifondazione Comunista participated. In the year of the global finance crisis, the right-wing managed to secure the mayoralty in the capital for the former fascist Gianni Alemanno.

The outgoing mayor, the transplant surgeon Ignazio Marino (PD), replaced Alemanno in 2013, when Rome was in its deepest crisis. The city faced the threat of bankruptcy. At the same time, the state prosecutor covered up the so-called Mafia Capitale, a network of mafia businessmen who bribed politicians and city officials in order to secure larger contracts. There was a growth of powerful mafia networks which continue to extend well beyond Rome today, not only in construction, rubbish collection and public transport, but even in the administration of refugee camps.

In Marino, the PD had a mayor who was prepared to use the state prosecutor to tackle the mafia underworld. But he failed to make much progress, because he opened up hostilities against the working population at the same time. In parallel with the social attacks of the Renzi government at the national level, Marino sought to impose the burden of the financial crisis on residents and city workers. He cut jobs, increased charges for street traders and residents, cut funding for cultural and historic institutions and made them more expensive to visit, and began to sell valuable tracts of land.

In October 2015, the national government withdrew its support for Marino. He was compelled to resign in the midst of weeks-long protests and strikes by school and university students against Renzi's reforms. The justification was that he allegedly paid two personal bills worth €20,000 with a credit card belonging to the city.

In the latest municipal elections, Renzi and the PD sought to remain in the background and put up candidates with little association with the traditions and politics of the PD. Giachetti

was originally a member of the Radical Party, which has campaigned in favour of the right to abortion and against the Catholic Church since the 1970s. In Milan, the PD chose Giuseppe Sala, who did not campaign as a politician, but as the manager and organiser of the World Expo 2015.

In the event, the strategy failed to pay off and the PD suffered a setback. In Milan, Sala, with 41.7 percent, is practically neck-and-neck for the run-off with Stefano Parisi (40 percent) from Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. The right-wing Lega Nord also backed Parisi, who was able to secure victory even in some working class districts that traditionally voted left. In Rome, Giachetti only secured victories in the centre of the city and in wealthy districts. Only one in four voters in Rome backed the PD candidate.

Even in Turin, a city dominated by automaker Fiat, the PD mayor Piero Fasino, a former CPI official and general secretary of the Democratic Left, was unable to win the election in the first round. With 42 percent, he will contest a run-off with businesswoman Chiara Appendino (31 percent) from the Five Star Movement. After the result, Fasino admitted, "The result gives expression to the large cities' social crisis: discontent, dissatisfaction, alienation."

In Naples, the PD did not even make the run-off. The current mayor De Magistris from the Italia dei Valori party won 42.6 percent, against the businessman Giovanni Lettari (Forza Italia) with 24 percent, who ran for the centre-right camp. Renzi's PD has not done better than third place in Naples since 2011. At that time, De Magistris, who campaigned as a state prosecutor against the swamp of corruption, shocked the PD and won.

The elections have made two things clear. The population is searching for an alternative, but there is no party that defends the interests of the working population.

The Five Star Movement benefits from this. It campaigns as a party fighting corruption and puts forward young, successful modernisers who do not come from the swamp of the traditional parties. The second round of voting in Rome is hardly likely to bring an upset, and Raggi of M5S will likely be able to emerge as mayor of the capital.

This was an "historic result," opined Beppe Grillo after the vote. After the death of his companion Gianroberto Casaleggio in April, Grillo declared he would withdraw from politics and return to the stage. His party ought to be able to manage under the new leadership of a five-person committee. But now after the electoral success in Rome, the one-time comic apparently intends to get involved again and lead the party away from its image as a protest party.

The next parliamentary elections will take place in Italy in spring 2017 at the latest. Grillo told the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* shortly before the municipal elections, "In Rome, it's all up for grabs. If we win, there are no longer any obstacles to victory on the national level."

But the Five Star Movement is in no sense a progressive

alternative. It puts forward a nationalist, bourgeois programme which defends the interests of small and medium-sized businesses and directs itself against workers and immigrants. (see: "The political significance of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement") In the name of its offensive against "waste in politics," M5S is ready to slash tens of thousands of public service jobs. At the European level, they collaborate with Nigel Farage's UKIP, and share its anti-European stance. To divert attention from the deepening capitalist crisis, M5S even calls for a return to the Italian lira instead of the euro.

In social policy, Grillo calls for the introduction of a citizens' income, (*reddito di cittadinanza*) modelled on Germany's Hartz IV social welfare. The M5S would like to offer payments of up to €780 per month, the official poverty level, to every Italian, on condition that the individual registers at a job centre and accepts one of the first three job offers. Otherwise, they would lose all right to further social welfare support. Raggi has also spoken out in favour of this model. It would be a gift to large corporations, who would have access to a large pool of cheap labour.

The stance of M5S on Rome's bankruptcy crisis was that the city's finances should not be bailed out because this would take the "caste," i.e. the political elite, out of the firing line. Today, Virginia Raggi is preparing to resolve the crisis at the expense of public sector workers, whose wages she intends to decimate in the name of combatting waste.

Raggi told *Fatto quotidiano* in March that the public transport companies had been abused as a bank ATM for years. "We have so many employees who are not at all exploited, and whom we pay wages to do nothing," stated Raggi, consciously using the term "per non fare nulla" (to do nothing). This is a reference to the calls to arms of the "Fanulloni," the "marauding do-nothings," which was used to conduct attacks on workers and employees in the public sector.



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