

Italian court ruling sparks demands for early elections

Marianne Arens
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The Constitutional Court in Rome last month overturned parts of Italy's 2015 electoral law, known as the "Italicum". However, even without these sections, in particular a provision for a second round if no party reaches 40 percent in the vote for parliament, the court's January 25 ruling held that the law as a whole is still valid.

This has unleashed a fierce discussion about early elections. Beppe Grillo of the Five Star Movement, the Lega Nord and also Matteo Renzi, who resigned as premier after the failed December 4 referendum on constitutional reform, are demanding immediate elections.

"Stop the delay", Matteo Renzi said at Democratic Party (PD) headquarters. "The parties should immediately say whether they want to contest the ruling." The PD advocates the "Mattarellum" (a hybrid form of proportional representation and majority voting, which was in force from 1993 to 2005). Otherwise, the election should be held according to the existing laws. Renzi was "satisfied that there is finally no longer an alibi".

But President Sergio Mattarella is hesitating. The legislative period officially runs until 2018, and the current government under Paolo Gentiloni (PD), which Mattarella approved provisionally in December, enjoys a majority in both chambers. Gentiloni, Renzi's former foreign minister, continues to rely on a coalition of the Democratic Party and the right-wing New Centre-Right (NCD). He is essentially continuing Renzi's pro-EU and bank-friendly policies.

Mattarella has no interest in holding quick elections, either under the Mattarellum (which he himself had designed 25 years ago), or even under the Italicum. In an amended Italicum, the election winner would only receive a majority if they reached 40 percent of the vote—a highly unusual outcome for Italy. What is far more likely is that the clear majority desired by big business, the banks and the EU would not emerge from an election.

Mattarella insists that elections can only take place when there is a uniform electoral law applying to both chambers of parliament. This is still not the case, even after the recent Constitutional Court ruling. The Italicum applies only to the

House of Representatives (lower house) and not to the Senate (upper chamber), which under Renzi's constitutional reform would have been abolished as an elected body. The December 4 referendum failed, and so the Senate remains. Since then, different electoral systems apply to the two chambers.

The government must now draw up a new electoral law, which must be agreed by both chambers, something that could take months. The text of the arguments underlying the ruling will only be issued in the second half of February.

Banking crisis and social polarization

Mattarella has many reasons to delay new elections. The government is under pressure from the EU and urgently needs time to get the acute banking crisis in Italy under control.

The Italian banks are burdened with a gigantic mountain of bad loans, and risk drawing the EU and the euro into the crisis. At the end of December, a six-month emergency programme was approved by the EU in order to save Italy's third largest bank, the ailing Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena, from collapse, using state funds.

While twenty billion euros of taxpayers' money are flowing into the banks, the social situation of the working population continues to deteriorate. A wave of corporate bankruptcies, 40 percent youth unemployment and the continuation of social devastation and austerity measures are increasingly being aimed against the working class by the government.

Working people are angry and bitter about the current situation. In early December, an Ipsos survey found that more than 80 percent of the population were dissatisfied with the economic situation. The "No" vote in the December 4 referendum was a clear rejection of the government's policy and the austerity diktats of the European Union.

In recent weeks, new earthquakes and extreme winter conditions have exacerbated the social misery. On January 18, a devastating avalanche buried Berghotel Rigopiano in Gran Sasso. There were 40 people in the building, which was buried under the avalanche and moved several metres. Two escaped by accident and nine were rescued, but 29 people died.

The tragedy has unleashed enormous public anger because help was seriously delayed and was only really in place after days. The deaths could have been avoided, and hotel guests and staff could have been rescued. Alarmed by the earthquake warnings, they had already packed their suitcases half a day before the disaster and were ready to leave. But they were not evacuated because the requested snowplough was slow in coming. Even when the avalanche came down the mountain, the emergency calls were first ignored. The prefecture responded by shrugging its shoulders and squandered vital hours.

Recently, it was revealed that the luxury hotel had been built illegally on the scree of a previous avalanche. Just months ago, a case against the former hotel operator for “illegal construction activities and corruption” was halted. Had the authorities responded, no one would have been permitted to stay there, and no one would have fallen victim to the avalanche.

For weeks, the Abruzzo region was being covered in deep snow. New tremors are still occurring. In August and October, two earthquakes devastated the area. Since then, thousands have had to live in inadequate temporary accommodation. A power outage affecting 300,000 people left them sitting in the dark in their container housing for days without heating. At least two pensioners froze to death.

All these events are worsening the social misery. For years, large sections of the working class and the youth have increasingly turned away from the establishment parties. However, what is missing is a workers’ party that fights for an international revolutionary programme. As a result, only the parties advocating an aggressive nationalism à la Trump have profited.

Beppe Grillo takes a stand for Donald Trump

In first place, this applies to Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S). According to a January 13 Ipsos survey, the Five Star Movement, with 30.9 percent, is in front of the Democratic Party, with 30.1 percent, (while both the Lega Nord and Berlusconi's Forza Italia only recorded about 12 percent).

Grillo vigorously attacked the other parties saying they were deliberately delaying the elections until September because their newer MPs are only able to claim their pensions after September. He said that the current government majority “created the worst institutional chaos ever”, and that immediate elections should be held under the existing law, and that he would personally ensure that the Five Star Movement passed the 40-percent hurdle.

Since Donald Trump took office, Grillo feels his fortunes are on the rise. Shortly after Trump's election victory, he declared on his blog that Trump had proclaimed “a general fuck-off (un Vaffanculo generale)”. In an interview published on 22 January in the French *Journal du Dimanche*, Grillo praised the new US president and supported his policies on several points, while he called the “European balance sheet” a “complete failure”.

“I am quite optimistic,” Grillo said when asked about Trump. He was saying “sensible things, for example, about the need to bring back economic activity inside the United States again ... The big companies would no longer go to Mexico, but remain in the United States, they would receive tax relief. He is getting the small and medium enterprises moving and withdrawing the US Army, which was stationed in all four corners of the world. I agree with all this.”

Under Obama, foreign policy was “a disaster,” Grillo said. “If Trump wants to move closer to Putin and put things back in good order, he deserves our support. Two giants talking together, this is the dream of the whole world!”

Clearly, Grillo is willing to serve Trump as an ally against the EU. This reinforces the crisis of the Italian government and the EU, and exacerbates the threat of war.



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