

Italy continues without a government

Marianne Arens
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Six weeks after the March 4 parliamentary election there is still no new Italian government in sight. On April 13, President Sergio Mattarella also broke off the second round of consultations without any result.

A coalition between the strongest single party, the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S), and the far-right Lega has so far failed because the leaders of these two parties, Matteo Salvini (Lega) and Luigi di Maio (M5S), both lay claim to the office of Prime Minister. M5S and Lega came closer together in March when they agreed to elect the chairmen of both chambers of parliament.

The Five Star Movement is ready to form a coalition with the Lega only on condition that Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia is not part of the government. "There are political synergies with the Lega," explained Di Maio, "but Silvio Berlusconi must step aside." A government in which Forza Italia was also involved "is absolutely out of the question."

The Five Star Movement had gained support mainly through the denunciation of the widespread corruption, which Berlusconi personifies. It fears that joining forces with the media billionaire could cost it masses of votes. M5S member Alessandro di Battista even referred to Berlusconi on Facebook as the "absolutely worst in our country."

Arithmetically, Lega and M5S do not need the support of Forza Italia to govern together. But for Salvini, breaking with Berlusconi is still an unacceptable condition. If the Lega were in government alone with the M5S, it would be the smaller coalition partner, and as a result, Salvini would have to leave the post of Prime Minister to Luigi di Maio.

In the elections, the Lega received just over half (17 percent) as many votes as the M5S. However, together with its allies, Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the fascist Fratelli d'Italia, it is the strongest group in parliament, at almost 40 percent.

To the president, too, a government involving Forza Italia appears less risky. Sergio Mattarella is now trying to get the 82-year-old Berlusconi on board, who is unable to hold office himself because of a tax evasion conviction. On April 17, he called the new Senate President Elisabetta Casellati (Forza Italia) and the new Chamber of Deputies President Roberto Fico (M5S) to the Quirinal Palace and involved them in the formation of a government. Elisabetta Casellati, a long-time confidante of Berlusconi, was commissioned with negotiating with the M5S to persuade them to accept Berlusconi.

Berlusconi himself has so far refused to collaborate with the Five Star Movement, which in his words, "does not even master the ABC of democracy." He advocates a "grand coalition as in Germany" that would encompass the entire right-wing alliance and the Democrats (PD).

The PD has so far rejected all coalition offers. It was the loser of the March 4 election and its seats have more than halved in the 630-seat parliament, from 377 to 163 seats. In the Chamber of Deputies it has only 111 seats and in the Senate only 52 seats.

Although Matteo Renzi, the former government head and PD general secretary, would be quite willing to collaborate with Berlusconi, the current transitional leader of the party, Maurizio Martina, has so far insisted on leading the Democrats into opposition. He also rejected a call for talks by Luigi di Maio.

However, after its election defeat in September 2017, the German Social Democrats had vowed to go into opposition, only in the end to enter Merkel's grand coalition again. Similarly, the PD could again play a role in a coalition government with the right-wing alliance or in an all-party government of "national unity."

But Matteo Salvini wants to avoid such a solution above all. He is counting on the upcoming regional

elections in Molise (April 22) and Friuli Venezia Giulia (April 29), where he hopes for a further upswing of the Lega vote. On Sunday, at an election campaign in Molise, he said, “It must be clear to all: If we win in Friuli and in Molise, then we will form the government in fourteen days.” Otherwise, the Lega would call for new elections.

President Sergio Mattarella has so far categorically ruled out new elections. As a last resort, he could possibly install a so-called technocratic government, like the Mario-Monti government, which came about under pressure from the EU in 2011 to replace Berlusconi. Even such an emergency solution would depend on being tolerated by a parliamentary majority.

The crisis in forming an Italian government makes clear how deep is the gulf opening up between the population and official politics. The demise of the PD was because it had tried to resolve the crisis at the expense of the working class. It made employment even more precarious through the Jobs Act and other measures, sharply attacking pensions and other social gains. Poverty has doubled; more and more young people are leaving the country to find a job abroad.

Any future government will continue this course, under pressure from the EU and global capital and to rescue the ailing Italian banks. Moreover, a Lega or M5S government will massively intensify measures against refugees and migrants. Salvini has already announced that he would expel 600,000 so-called “illegal immigrants.”

Added to this is the pressure to participate in the EU’s war strategy and to defend its own economic interests through rearmament and war. This has once again been shown by the reaction of all parties to the bombing of Syria. While the majority of the population, which had already vehemently opposed the Iraq war and the Libyan war, regards the war in Syria with disgust, leading politicians welcomed the April 14 attack.

Paolo Gentiloni (PD), the caretaker government head, stressed in parliament on April 17 that Italy was not neutral. Although it had not participated in the bombing, it supported it “in recent days and will continue to do so” to counter Assad’s alleged chemical weapons. PD head Maurizio Martina uncritically reiterated the unsubstantiated allegation of a Syrian chemical weapons operation in Duma and expressed his

full support for the Gentiloni government, the EU and the UN.

Luigi di Maio commented in a similar vein. The head of the Five Star Movement, which has so far been marked by EU scepticism, explicitly emphasized his devotion to the EU, the UN and the Security Council. “We stand by the side of our Allies,” said di Maio. “In this difficult phase, I believe that the EU must have the strength to stand together and united.” Berlusconi poses as a staunch supporter of accelerated rearmament and demanded: “We need a strong army.”

Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, head of the post-fascist Fratelli d’Italia, spoke out against the attack. Not because they oppose militarism, but because they do not see it taking enough account of Italy’s imperialist interests. While Salvini praised “far-sighted Putin,” Meloni said her party was against the attack, “not because we are friends of Putin or Assad, but because we are a movement of patriots. The nations that are intervening in Syria have geopolitical interests: are they ours too?”



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