

Vicious Italian campaign, many scenarios

Electoral law and divided coalitions benefit populists

by Antonio Armellini in Rome

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Unusually vicious campaigning has been a feature of the Italian election due to take place on 4 March. A centre-right coalition around Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and a centre-left coalition around Matteo Renzi's Democratic party (PD) face public disenchantment with politics in their attempts to prevent runaway success for the Five Star Movement (M5S) populists led by Luigi Di Maio. Both coalitions are fragile and riven by internal conflicts. Under the Rosatellum electoral law of 2017, a third of parliamentary seats are allocated using a first past the post system and two-thirds using a proportional method. This flawed law favours coalitions and could benefit the populists, who are running alone.

According to the polls, M5S could be the party with the most votes and the centre right the coalition with the most votes, with no one able to form a stable majority. But over 40% of Italians plan to abstain and things could change if a good number turn out to vote. The coalitions vowed never to break ranks, whatever the outcome, but to form a government they may have to split to form new alliances. M5S may have to renege on its promise not to seek partners to form a government. Alternatively, the president of the republic could appoint a 'technical' government – probably led by current Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni – to draw up a much-needed new electoral law.

Berlusconi's return to the fray was a surprise for many in Europe, but not for Italians. They have watched the new-born 'grandfather of the republic', as The New York Times calls him, deploy his skills as a wily tactician cum master salesman to form a coalition with Matteo Salvini's populist Northern League (LN) and the Brothers of Italy neo-fascists. The coalition is deeply divided on issues like protectionism and Europe.

The centre left is smarting from a fall in approval ratings, as Renzi struggles to recover from defeat in a referendum on constitutional reform he turned into a personal plebiscite. This is compounded by constant bleeding from the rump hard-left Free and Equal party (LeU). There is great animosity between the two groups. Competition with LeU could cost Renzi a good number of seats. He has been campaigning energetically, but the odds on a recovery are looking thin.

Widespread feelings of dissatisfaction with politics represent votes for M5S, which has not been dented by the abysmal performance of local administrators in cities like Rome and Turin, or by its founder, the comedian Beppe Grillo, keeping his distance. Di Maio is cautiously trying to steer away from earlier aggressively populist positions.

The possible outcomes are:

'Trumpian' alternative: less likely. M5S comes first but falls short of an overall majority. It forms a populist and anti-European government with the LN who, having lost out with Berlusconi, leaves the centre-right coalition. This alliance would face strong opposition.

Stalemate: possible but unlikely. M5S and the centre right are level at around 30% each. The Gentiloni government stays on to hold new elections after the summer. Passing a new electoral law in a matter of weeks could prove impossible, and fears that early elections with no changes would be a landslide for M5S mitigate against this option.

Centre-right majority: possible. The coalition could achieve or come close to an absolute majority, partly at the expense of M5S. Any shortfall in seats could be offset by recruiting turncoats, which Italy's parliament has never lacked. Fundamental differences among members of the coalition, including on protectionism and Europe, could make a stable government problematic.

Grand coalition Italian-style: possible. The centre left does better than expected, at around 28%, and Berlusconi joins forces with Renzi. The LN could split and a rump could join the government. Such a coalition would be a reversal of both sides' electoral promises and could cause great turmoil, but some see it as the likeliest outcome.

Government of the president: possible. Parties would agree adequate time is needed for a new electoral law. The president of the republic would appoint a government under Gentiloni, with broad support and a limited mandate. It would face criticism for a lack of legitimacy (like the governments of Mario Monti and Enrico Letta).

None of these scenarios would affect Italy's external credibility significantly. The exception is a M5S-LN government, which would pose a serious challenge to domestic stability and could have dire implications for Europe.

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