

Italy: Scandals Aren't Enough to Stop Salvini

Saturday 10 August 2019, by [BRODER David](#) (Date first published: 9 August 2019).

After a year dominating the government from the Interior Ministry, Matteo Salvini is now set to become prime minister. The opposition has worked hard to highlight what a bad guy he is — but totally failed to confront him politically.

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It's an index of the Left's impotence that its main hope of stopping Matteo Salvini today lies in some sort of institutional "fix" to prevent early elections. After Salvini's Lega pulled out of its coalition with the Five Star Movement (M5s) on Thursday, Italy looks likely to face a fresh general election this October, in which the hard-right party could win over 35 percent of the vote. With the Lega near-guaranteed victory, the slim prospect of Salvini not becoming premier depends on President Sergio Mattarella creating some sort of "stopgap" technocratic cabinet.

The immediate future looks grim for whoever doesn't want to see Salvini fulfill his bid to secure what he calls "full powers." Having led all polls since last summer, his nationalist Lega has continued to expand its influence, entering new regions and securing over one-third of votes in this May's European elections. Current premier Giuseppe Conte, an independent, claims that Salvini openly told him he planned to crash the M5S-Lega coalition in order to "cash in" his poll lead. But the Lega's confidence especially owes to the feebleness of the opposition.

That's not to say that everything is going Salvini's way — after all, in July evidence emerged that the Lega had sought funds from Russian oil oligarchs. In a further revelation of Russian ties, documents emerged showing that at the ambassador's instigation Salvini ordered picket lines outside Moscow-based firms to be broken up.

Yet for all this evidence of collaboration, the opposition Democrats' (PD) efforts to paint Salvini as a Russian stooge have failed to impress his own base. It turns out that those who trust in Salvini weren't just waiting for the proof that he's a bad guy.

The problem isn't so much that older left-wing voters have turned to the Lega — in fact Salvini's strength owes much more to his rallying of the conservative vote, as he crushes parties like Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Indeed, a poll after the 2018 election showed that only one in eleven ex-Communist voters backed the Lega, as against around one in three for each of the PD and Luigi di Maio's M5s. Yet while the Lega's working-class base is still growing, the forces ranging from liberalism to the far left offer little to mobilize the unemployed, the low-paid, and the young.

It would be mistaken to sink into fatalism — indeed, other recent breakthrough acts have often proven underwhelming. Amid Italy's chronic economic ills, the M5s (becoming the biggest party in 2013) and even Matteo Renzi (winning 40 percent in the 2014 European election) were briefly raised up as saviors, only to head into near-instant collapse. The Lega's own success is itself built on an

only recent bubble of support. Yet if it has emerged in volatile times, it also benefits from a more profound cultural shift, in which left-wing values are barely even voiced at all.

Investing in the Future?

The shift in Italian public life is particularly apparent on economic issues. This was apparent in the final act of the M5s-Lega government, a parliamentary dispute over the TAV high-speed rail line being built from Turin to Lyon. Since its foundation in 2009, M5s has strongly opposed TAV on both cost and environmental grounds, and after Conte said last week that the project would nonetheless be going ahead, Di Maio's party tabled a motion in the Senate to abandon it. This failed, as the Lega made a bloc with the PD to proceed with its construction.

Salvini used the M5s vote to claim that only he was standing up for economic development — remarking that government business would remain logjammed if “Mr. No” put up obstacles to infrastructure projects that are designed to promote growth. Local communities have attacked TAV as disruptive and a waste of public funds, while M5s' opposition to such projects is cohered around its “anti-corruption” agenda, seeing grandi opere as a typical source of bribes and embezzlement. Yet the question of how to promote an alternative economic model went unanswered.

What also went missing in this dispute over TAV was any recognition of the falseness of Salvini's rhetoric of economic regeneration, or indeed the promotion of any other projects to break Italy out of its three decades of stagnation. Yet this also concerns issues far more important than TAV. Indeed, the 15 percent flat-tax rate the Lega proposes would risk blowing a €100 billion hole in the public funds — death to fiscal stimulus. Indeed, despite the Lega's rhetoric about challenging Eurozone deficit limits, it is anything but a party of jobs and investment.

For evidence of this we need look only to the events of August 14, 2018 and the collapse of the Ponte Morandi road bridge, killing forty-three people. After the disaster the M5s called for operator Autostrade per l'Italia to be taken into public ownership, such as to guarantee the proper maintenance of the road, but then backed off as soon as its then-ally Salvini dissented. The PD quite aptly pointed out that in 2008 Salvini had voted to bail out the company's owners — though he could retort that in 1999 it was the center-left that had first privatized it.

If the Lega is often described as an exponent of “welfare chauvinism” — a force that insists on the need to keep out immigrants, in the name of making welfare programs affordable — the party only fulfils the racist side of this promise, using attacks on the “do gooder” leftists who help migrants to mount a general assault on the notion of social solidarity. This week Salvini smeared the very idea of a minimum wage as “the stuff of socialist regimes,” citing the unions' fear of being cut out of collective bargaining as reason to dismiss the project entirely.

Yet in this pro-boss stance, Salvini faced a political open goal. Like their opposition to the M5s's welfare allowances to jobseekers, unions' merely defensive insistence on their collective bargaining role gives nothing to the lowest-paid and unemployed Italians, who do indeed want a legal floor on their income in order to protect them from the worst exploitation. This corporatist focus on unions' existing power bases (and this, in a context when most members are pensioners) offers no alternative model of work or welfare, instead playing into Salvini's own talking points.

Elitism

The PD has at least somewhat relaxed its rhetoric about the lazy and feckless unemployed. Where Matteo Renzi and his finance minister Carlo Calenda sought to transform the party into an explicitly centrist vehicle more akin to Emmanuel Macron's La République en Marche, new leader Nicola Zingaretti has maintained a more social democratic identity. Yet even as the "third force" of M5s wanes and Italian politics returns to a more classic center-left/right binary, the PD has failed to learn the lessons of its decline.

Zingaretti has testy relations with Renzi, and vaunts a different direction for the PD. This change has, however, taken place mainly at the level of leadership style — a softer, less intensely personal approach — rather than a new policy agenda. Reliant on M5s votes in his role as president of the Lazio region, Zingaretti represents a less harsh polarization between "centrists" and "populists" than Renzi/Calenda had sought. Yet his tenure has also been dominated by "budget trimming," including in the vital field of health care.

The current small revival in PD fortunes mainly owes to Salvini's own polarizing effect. Forever vaunting the need to make Italy a "normal country," the PD is however distant from promising developments in the US Democrats and UK Labour, or even the Spanish Socialists' slight and contradictory shift to the left. If after 1991 the former leaders of the Partito Comunista Italiano declared class politics dead, in fact the PD has itself disproved this — for its voters are the very oldest and wealthiest Italians.

The PD is not a party rooted in mass democratic engagement, but a child of the 1990s collapse of the old parties, which were replaced by personalized campaign machines rooted in the entertainment industry. Indeed, it is itself uprooting the kind of territorial structures that would allow for deeper democratic engagement. This Tuesday, in historic "red" Bologna, the PD mayor ordered in the bulldozers to demolish the XM24 social center — a move Salvini himself cheered on via Twitter.

Indeed, here the PD simply played in to Salvini's attacks on social movements, seeking to capitalize on their weakness with fresh legislation. Last week he passed a security bill — loyally backed by M5s — which harshly criminalizes "masking up" on demonstrations and imposes huge fines on migrant rescue boats. Even with the political left invisible and social movements at historic lows, Salvini revels in trampling on his opponents, hardening his conservative base with authoritarian measures which even Berlusconi shied from.

As an index of the importance of this kind of "vice signaling," immigration again seems set to dominate the fall 2019 election campaign — despite the fact that only 3,500 people have reached Italy by sea so far this year. Heroic and brave efforts are being made to save people left to die in the sea, while the interior Minister crudely condemns them. For Salvini, the attack on migrant rescue efforts is just another way of showing off a "tough guy" image from the highest public office.

Salvini has skillfully tied this to a wider "culture war," in which he — a career politician — stands for ordinary people as against "Soros-backed" NGOs and their political accomplices. This agenda is, at the same time, heavily sustained by those of his opponents who seem to think the problem is his "vulgarity." Complaints that it's undignified for the interior minister to DJ topless at a beach, or that he has an ugly paunch, just confirm Salvini's message to Italians that he is a "guy like them."

For now, the landscape can only be characterized as bleak. In 1975 Thomas Bates commented in Gramscian tones of the organic crisis that occurs when "people cease to believe the words of the national leaders and begin to abandon the traditional parties," and believe those who blame ethnic minorities and opposition parties. For Bates, if "progressive forces fail to impose their own solution,"

this crisis creates a “dangerous situation” in which the old ruling class may “seek salvation in a ‘divine leader.’”

Citing Bates in his recent history of postwar Italy, John Foot opined that it wasn’t clear whether such a “Caesar” figure had yet appeared on the scene; even as he wrote these words back in 2017, Salvini’s Lega was only fourth in the polls. Today, we see that the Caesar most certainly has arrived. If there was a moment for progressive forces to impose their solution, it seems already to have passed. Salvini’s success may prove as ephemeral as his predecessors’. For now, there seem to be almost no obstacles to his advance.

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P.S.

• Jacobin, 08.09.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/salvini-lega-m5s-italy>

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