

Losing Ground - Italy's Five Star Movement and the Left's weakness

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Italy's xenophobic Five Star Movement has capitalized on the Left's weakness to emerge as the lone voice of anti-establishment voters.

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Italy's June 5 municipal vote represented the latest electoral challenge to Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and his social-liberal Democratic Party (PD). The results were marked by voters' anger at establishment corruption, with the Five Star Movement (M5S) [1] and the hard right rising at the expense of the PD as well as the conservative forces once led by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI).

The vote also revealed the Italian left's current weakness and presage trouble for Renzi's proposed constitutional reforms, which face a national referendum this fall.

Conspiracy Theories

In the run-up to the Roman mayoral election, M5S senator Paola Taverna claimed that the PD and FI put up weak candidates to ensure that M5S would win [2]. Their scheme, she says, was to make her party "economically dependent" on the national and regional governments run by the centrist PD, then cut off funding and "make us look bad."

Widely reported as a gaffe, Taverna's pre-election comments are characteristic of the self-declared anti-establishment party's conspiracy theories. Still, a stopped clock is right twice a day, and with barely less regularity we find confirmation of allegations of base intrigue in Italian politics.

Yet it seems that the established parties' self-sabotage played a greater role in the M5S's victory in the Roman mayoral poll than any fresh conspiracy.

The election followed the 2014 "Mafia capital" scandal that implicated both the PD and FI [3], who have run Italy since the *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville) [4] affair destroyed the old Christian Democrats and Socialists in the mid-1990s.

The 2014 investigations uncovered a decade-long embezzlement scheme run by mob bosses, a former fascist terrorist, and politicians of both center-left and center-right parties.

€1.3 billion in taxpayer funds, notably those meant for refugee facilities and road repairs, were stolen. But the media focused their scorn on the one figure who seems to have had the least to do with it, the ineffective PD mayor of Rome, Ignazio Marino.

After a series of widely reported parking violations, the hapless Marino was forced to resign in an unrelated expenses scandal last October, before bizarrely retracting his resignation and then being deposed by his own party.

Renzi threw Marino to the lions, and the PD's Roman organization chose Roberto Giacchetti as their candidate. Giacchetti is loyal to the centrist prime minister: they share a common past in the PD's liberal "Daisy" coalition rather than its ex-Communist branch.

Meanwhile the center-right FI switched its loyalties. They initially backed the Right's unity candidate Guido Bertolaso before he withdrew in favor of Giorgia Meloni, youth minister in Berlusconi's last government and a member of the Italian Brotherhood, a far-right party with ancestry in the fascist Italian Social Movement.

Ultimately Berlusconi threw his support behind Alfio Marchini, a businessman and liberal "independent" who won just 10 percent of the vote.

M5S's previously unknown candidate Virginia Raggi, a lawyer selected in an online primary, won Sunday's election with 35 percent. Her barely political campaign called for responsible government, an end to corruption, and the enforcement of ticket purchases on city buses.

She seems highly likely to win the runoff, given both her current lead and the likelihood that third-placed candidate Meloni's voters, accounting for 20 percent, will break in her favor against the PD, which scored nearly 25 percent.

Mostly, she rode the wave of Romans' fatigue over the PD administration's antics. But M5S may be no better even in terms of financial propriety: in May their own Livorno mayor, Filippo Nogarin, was charged with fraud after the municipal refuse agency went into receivership.

Sunday's vote was only the first round. Runoffs will take place on June 19 in those elections where no candidate scored 50 percent, including the country's four biggest cities — Rome, Naples, Milan, and Turin.

Of these, only Milan's race was close. In Naples the left-wing incumbent Luigi de Magistris secured 43 percent, almost 19 percent ahead of Berlusconi's candidate and 22 percent ahead of Renzi's; in Turin the PD mayor Piero Fassino slumped to 42 percent from the 57 percent he won five years ago, but still looks likely to win the second round against M5S, who topped 30 percent.

Anti-Establishment

In each of these cities a strong surge of anti-establishment sentiment was channeled through M5S. Though highly eclectic and opportunist, this party — run as an e-democracy by its charismatic and unremovable leader Beppe Grillo — would best be described as a hybrid of the Pirate Party and the UK Independence Party.

Its platform is libertarian, skeptical of the eurozone, and populist; opposed to the liberal establishment and governed by strong anti-migrant and anti-public-sector sentiments.

The only straightforward victory for the neoliberal center was in Italy's wealthiest city, Milan, where previous left-wing mayor Giuliano Pisapia stood down. The main center-left candidate was PD's Giuseppe Sala who tied at 41 percent with FI's Stefano Parisi, guaranteeing a close runoff between the two main centrist parties.

Meanwhile, left candidates, including those associated with Sinistra Italiana — a new party made up of former Communists and dissatisfied PD members — did poorly across the country.

One such ex-PD legislator, Stefano Fassina, earned just 4 percent of the vote in Rome, a result typical of the party's fortunes.

Neapolitan mayor De Magistris, an independent anti-Mafia magistrate backed by most of the old Communist Party, as well as the Greens and the liberal anti-corruption party Italia dei Valori, was the exception.

However, while De Magistris is a fine independent mayor in a city where Alessandra Mussolini's "post-fascists" almost won the mayoralty in 1993, his election demonstrated the radical left's absence as a distinct force in Italian politics, rather than a prop to wider "civic" coalitions.

After two decades of GDP stagnation, 40 percent national youth unemployment, and mass emigration, the historic bastions of the Communist Party have become battlegrounds between the PD's liberal centrists and a rising xenophobic populism.

M5S won Livorno in 2014 and might capture Turin this month; the hard-right Lega Nord forced a runoff in Bologna, the erstwhile red heartland.

Renzi will be worried that Berlusconi's conservative pole has fallen so far behind. Indeed, while M5S was the big winner on June 5, FI was the biggest loser, massively eclipsed by Grillo's party as the main governmental alternative.

The PD is increasingly unable to use the FI and cartoonish ogre Berlusconi to mobilize its own voters. Current national polls have Renzi's party at 31 percent, M5S at 27 percent, Lega Nord at 14 percent, and FI at just 12 percent.

This weekend's results might also predict the coming constitutional referendum, when voters will decide if they approve of Renzi's proposed parliamentary reorganization. The prime minister has staked his political future on the outcome, promising to resign if the referendum fails.

After he easily passed substantial neoliberal reforms in the labor code and education, Renzi's new law would expand executive power by weakening the Senate and establish a two-party system at the expense of smaller parties.

Considering the Five Star Movement's rise outside the bounds of the historic right, the organic development of Italian politics militates against such a bipartisan system, and Renzi faces a broad opposition in the referendum.

We can only hope that the referendum will at least provide a definitive answer to Italy's endless electoral reform debate. This seems unlikely given that the precedent for constitutional tinkering has already been set.

The current electoral law was debated for a decade before being declared unconstitutional three years ago. This fall Italians can finally vote on a new one, in what will also effectively be another referendum on Renzi's leadership.

After the June 5 vote the radical left can at least celebrate De Magistris's success in Naples, showing the possibility of a sustained challenge to the parties of the neoliberal center.

But most of all they will rue having conceded so much ground to the Five Star Movement,

undeniably the party today seen by voters as the anti-establishment voice.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 6.10.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/italy-five-star-beppe-grillo-m5s-elections-corruption-pd/>

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Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 39618), [Behind the Italian Five Star Movement – A force for the status quo](#).

[2] http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2016/02/16/paola-taverna-roma-complotto_n_9242668.html

[3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11271882/Mafia-capital-Rome-hit-by-mobster-scandal.html>

[4] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/the-sleaze-factor-clean-hands-team-fails-to-wash-away-tangentopoli-dirt-fiona-leney-looks-at-italys-1444839.html>