

“No” to Renzi’s referendum in Italy: Democracy Against Neoliberalism

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Matteo Renzi’s constitutional reform was politically illegitimate in method and antidemocratic in content. We should celebrate its rejection.

Listening to the media, you would think that yesterday’s Italian referendum results were yet another victory of right-wing populism against democracy. The situation, however, is much more complex than this, and the No victory is a victory for democracy and for the defense of social rights worth celebrating.

The constitutional reform proposed by Matteo Renzi’s government was politically illegitimate in its method and antidemocratic in its content. The current parliament was selected with an electoral law that has been judged as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. Moreover, Renzi’s government was created after he managed to hijack the Democratic Party (PD), marginalizing its left and the former majority by secretly organizing a “No” vote in the parliament against the presidential candidate — Romano Prodi — put forward by the PD leadership.

Finally, Renzi adopted disgraced former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi’s style in putting forward the constitutional reform, by not trying to reach a large consensus across the parliamentary spectrum, but rather using institutional tricks to block parliamentary discussion, to the point that the opposition decided not to participate in the vote on the reform, in protest. As for the content, this constitutional reform was the last of a long series of attempts at revising the constitution in direction of stronger executive power and at the expense of democratic representation.

The Italian people rejected a previous attempt by Berlusconi in 2006, when the center-right government tried to pass a presidentialist reform of the constitution. But this is a much older story, which began already in the postwar era. The constitution of 1948 was the outcome of a compromise between the three main forces of the antifascist resistance: the Christian Democrats, the Italian Communist Party, and the liberal-socialist Action Party.

However, a sector of the Italian political class has never accepted the democratic liberties and the egalitarian principles espoused by the 1948 constitution. This story of attacks on the constitution continued in the last decades of the twentieth century with various attempts at changing the constitution and with increasingly antidemocratic reforms of the electoral law passed by parliament with the support of center-left forces.

In order to explain the outcome of this referendum, which saw a massive turnout of 67 percent and No winning with almost 60 percent of the votes, one has to look at the convergence of multiple factors. Forces across the political spectrum opposed the reform for different reasons. On the Left, the measure was challenged by the CGIL, the country’s biggest union; by the left of the Democratic Party, including its former secretary; by the National Association of Italian Partisans (ANPI); by the whole radical left, including left unions, social coalitions, students’ organizations, and the various

networks of occupied spaces; and by a number of prominent left-leaning constitutional law experts such as Gustavo Zagrebelsky. The arguments ranged from the defense of democratic representation and popular sovereignty against the principle of governability to the opposition to Renzi's aggressively neoliberal political project, of which the constitutional reform is only a portion.

On the Right, the reform was opportunistically opposed by the xenophobic Northern League, by the right-wing nationalist party Fratelli d'Italia, by neo-fascist forces such as Casa Pound and Forza Nuova, and — reluctantly — by Berlusconi. The reason for the mainstream right's opposition is rather clear: as Renzi highly personalized the vote on the constitutional reform and linked the destiny of his government to the outcome of the referendum, the currently disorganized and fragmented right saw it as an opportunity to get rid of the government and start a process that may allow them to regroup and be competitive again.

Finally, the Five Star Movement, a catch-all populist movement with highly contradictory positions, resisted the constitutional reform all the way through the parliamentary debate, protesting at every turn against the violation of the most basic parliamentary rules by the government. The reasons for their position combined both a defense of parliamentary democracy's rules and the ambition to overtake the PD as Italy's principal party.

The impressive defeat of Renzi's project will most likely begin a period of confusion and instability. Liberal fears about this, however, entirely miss the point. Over the course of five years, the political forces most linked to European Union interests and projects have carried on a stunning attack on social rights: the technocratic Mario Monti government, supported by the center-left, introduced the obligation of balanced budgets in the constitution, in obedience to the European Treatises, making even moderate Keynesian policies of public spending unconstitutional. That same government also passed a devastating pension reform, part of which has been judged unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court.

But it was Renzi's government that succeeded even where Berlusconi had failed. The worst reforms passed by his government included measures like the Jobs Act, which abolished Article 18 of the Statuto dei Lavoratori, which made impossible for employers to fire a worker without justification, and introduced further forms of casualization of labor; and the reform of the public school system, which significantly strengthened the corporate-style management of schools, gravely affecting work conditions for teachers and the nature of the curricula for students.

Ultimately, Renzi hoped to pass both an antidemocratic constitutional reform combined with a new electoral law that would have established a majority bonus system in the Chamber of Deputies: as an outcome the government would have achieved entire control of the parliament, including control of the times for parliamentary discussion on laws deemed to be part of the government's program.

It's worth considering what would have happened if Yes had won. Likely, we would have seen a continued rise of the populist and far right in Italy, fueled by a center-left that has incessantly put forward austerity and neoliberal policies which have significantly worsened the conditions of life of the Italian population, affecting in particular younger people, whose chances of even finding a decent job are nil. (Not by chance, 81 percent of voters between eighteen and thirty-four voted No and Yes won only among voters older than fifty-three.)

If Yes had won, we would have risked ending up with a Five Star Movement or right-wing government with much greater executive powers than the ones currently allowed by the constitution. Not to speak of the majority system bonus's effects. And even in the case Renzi had managed to secure a majority for the center-left at the next elections, we would have ended up with more neoliberalism and with an even stronger government with no space for effective opposition.

The main motivation behind the No vote was the opposition to the government. But regardless of the diverging motivations behind the No vote, the referendum outcome defended democracy and popular sovereignty, destabilized the political system in a phase in which stability only means further attacks on democratic liberties and social rights, and opened a political space for a possible rebirth of social movements. On November 26, 150,000 women marched in Rome against male violence and on a radical platform, and the next day, thousands gathering in an assembly and workshops called for a women's strike on March 8, uniting the fight against violence with opposition to austerity, social and health services cuts, and the casualization of labor.

Women's assemblies are being created in the whole country in preparation for the March action. The struggle we have ahead of us will of course be hard, as the Right is already trying to capitalize on the referendum result, hiding the fact that even a large part of PD voters voted against the reform. But the answer to this cannot be fear or lesser evilism, for these responses only work to strengthen the Right. The answer must be a return to politics as confrontation, starting from a participation in the women's strike of March 8, which is opening the path for social resistance.

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* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4793>