

EU: The Five Star Movement Is Imploding

Friday 30 August 2019, by [BRODER David](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2019).

The Five Star Movement emerged promising to liberate Italians from a corrupt political establishment. But its hollow claim to stand outside the left-right divide has made it into a mere stooge for Matteo Salvini.

On July 24, the Italian Senate lay half empty, as prime minister Giuseppe Conte answered claims that his interior minister is drawing on Russian oil money. Coy about [evidence](#) that Matteo Salvini's aides had negotiated funds from Putin-aligned oligarchs, the premier said he did not yet have cause to lose confidence in the Lega leader. Salvini himself skipped Conte's address, remarking that he had "[less than zero](#)" interest in what the prime minister had to say. Also absent from the Senate was the other party of government — Luigi Di Maio's Five Star Movement (M5S). Its senators variously claimed that they were protesting against Salvini's conduct, or else objecting to Conte's endorsement of the TAV rail project, long a target of M5S objections.

Thirteen months since its formation, tensions are mounting in the M5S-Lega "government of change." This may not signal imminent collapse — there have been similar theatrics before, without this heralding an open split. And while Salvini may hope to "cash in" on his dominant position in the opinion polls by forcing an early general election, he can't do this if the other parties — and the president — resist it. Yet the tone of exchanges between M5S, the Lega, and independent prime minister Conte is clearly harshening. Interior minister Salvini is openly disdainful of the premier — a weak figurehead with no base of his own — and has publicly cast doubt on M5S's loyalty to the parties' "contract for government."

In fact, it's hard to think of any issue on which M5S *has* stood up to Salvini. Fearing a split in the coalition, not only has M5S swallowed Lega plans to slash tax and immigration, but it has been curiously unmoved by its coalition partner's shadier dealings — from its delayed repayment of €49 million of embezzled public funds to Salvini's [move to break up picket lines](#) outside a Russian-owned firm on the instigation of the Russian embassy. No longer just a blank screen onto which voters can project their own hopes, throughout its time in office, M5S has seen its base fragmented. Between the March 2018 general election and the May 2019 European contest, M5S slumped from 32 to 17 percent support — Salvini's party rose from 17 to 34 percent.

This reflects a profound identity crisis for M5S. From the outset, it claimed to stand not for "left or right," but simply for "honest politics." Both its own officials' legal troubles and its kowtowing to the Lega have enfeebled this posture. A focus on fighting establishment corruption has, historically, driven M5S toward more conventionally political stances — notably a distrust of big-spending infrastructure projects. This was epitomized by its opposition to the TAV high-speed rail line from Turin to Lyon, long a target of protests by locals and environmentalists. Yet now the government that was elected thanks to M5S votes is turning toward support for the project — Salvini wills it, and Di Maio has been forced to step back from claims that it can be canceled cost-free.

M5S's failures aren't just a tale of the "corrupting effect of high office." Rather, they stem from its refusal to confront the sources of unaccountable power, instead wielding only an empty moralism.

Rather than tackle the material sources of corruption, and in particular the tendering processes that channel public funds toward private business, M5S insists it is possible to clean up public life by electing “honest citizens” in place of “politicians.” Since Silvio Berlusconi’s reign, Italian politics has been intensely personalized, as the fight to vaunt one’s individual integrity has displaced the contest between different visions of social change. Forever vaunting its own novelty, M5S has, however, merely radicalized this logic — with dismal results.

Anti-Corruption Has Failed Before

The Berlusconi era ought to have served as a warning. Since his first election run in 1994, his center-left opponents proved far less interested in confronting his policies (his attacks on labor rights, his harsh immigration policy, his involvement in the Iraq War) as denouncing his criminal ties and sleazy personal behavior. This also allowed them to shift their economic agenda into the pro-business center, pivoting from the fragmented working class toward middle-class “moderates” turned off by Berlusconi’s vulgarity. On this basis, the ex-Communist PDS (which later fused into the Democratic Party) could conduct large-scale privatizations while disciplining what remained of the Left behind the “anti-fascist” call to stop Berlusconi.

Not only was judicial populism ineffective in stopping Berlusconi, but it had much to do with his initial rise. The tycoon had first entered frontline politics in reaction to the “Bribesville” trials of 1992–94, a spectacular series of corruption cases that felled the historic Christian-Democratic and Socialist parties. If the mass parties’ deeper roots in local *sezioni* had begun to decline already in the 1980s, the end of the Communist Party and then Bribesville brought their decrepit structures tumbling. As star magistrate Antonio Di Pietro later admitted, this also created a political vacuum, filled not by renewed popular engagement but by personalized campaign machines rooted in media and the entertainment industry.

This mediatization of politics coincided with another decisive shift in the terms of political choice: Italy’s entry into the European Economic and Monetary Union. Economic policy — all parties from the post-Communist PDS to the Lega Nord now agreed — was to be framed by the convergence criteria for joining the single currency. Even as Italy’s economy tanked under massive public spending and wage cuts, the center-left and hard right were united by a common commitment to “rationalizing” the public accounts. After the Lega’s first falling-out with Berlusconi, in 1995 it joined the PDS in backing an austere cabinet led by former Bank of Italy chief Lamberto Dini. None of its ministers had been elected.

Founding the M5S in the late 2000s, comedian Beppe Grillo took many cues from this first wave of judicial populism. M5S was a child of both anti-Berlusconi protests and discontent with the center-left, amidst chronic economic woes. Weighed down by vast interest payments, low investment, and poor productivity growth, Italy is the only country other than Greece whose GDP has fallen since euro entry in 1999. The related decline in job prospects and services created a large reservoir of voters alienated from the traditional parties — especially the young, the unemployed, and Southerners. Yet M5S’s own “anti-elitism” was curiously one-sided — a fight against the largesse of the powerful, rather than an economic program to end austerity for the many.

From the outset, M5S was driven by simple moral binaries: “citizens” versus “caste,” the “honest” versus the “corrupt.” The convergence of the main parties fed this imaginary: in 2011, Berlusconi’s People of Freedom (PdL) joined the Democrats (PD) in backing a technocratic cabinet, and in 2013 the two formed a short-lived grand coalition. For M5S, the Democrats were a mere “PD without an L,” in cahoots with Berlusconi. At the same time, M5S’s bid to displace the Left exploited the woes of Rifondazione Comunista, a rival protest force burnt out in coalition with the PD. M5S’s promise relied not on collective mobilization but on the simple act of voting out the powerful: an appealing

prospect for a population ground down by years of austerity.

Officials Without Convictions

Even when M5S denounced the PD's similarities to Berlusconi, this was not a call for a turn to the left. The *grillini* instead recycled an old technocratic call to make Italy a "normal country," liberated from corruption and bureaucratic waste. Inspired by typewriter tycoon Adriano Olivetti — in postwar years an advocate of patrician schemes to solve class conflict through enlightened management — M5S guru Gianroberto Casaleggio advocated a depoliticized administration, where "ideology" and "the parties" would be replaced by an unmediated, real-time direct democracy driven by the internet. Allying a technocratic faith in the algorithm to a libertarian distrust for collective interests, Casaleggio's online platforms were less spaces for democratic deliberation than carefully calibrated surveys of consumer preferences.

Indeed, though labeled "populist," M5S speaks less of the singular "people" than of "citizens." Individualized by Italy's atomized class structure as well as M5S's own organizational form, its scattered supporters are only loosely reassembled within such structures as online forums and referendums. Yet precisely M5S's success, in its opposition years, was to remain constitutively slippery, an empty cipher onto which its supporters could project their own interests and ideals, loosely hung over such ideas as "honesty" and "fairness." The M5S's first complement of MPs elected in 2013 consistently abstained on divisive social-policy issues, rather than allow the ranks of "citizens" to be split over such questions as gay civil partnerships.

Its use of online polls did not mean that M5S sought to involve its supporters in policy-making. Indeed, despite its origins in local "Meetups" convened on the social media site of the same name, there were to be none of the intermediate structures that characterized the old mass parties, from local branches to policy conferences or debates in party press. On the decline everywhere in the West in the late twentieth century, such structures did residually endure in forces like Britain's Labour Party, but the M5S, like Berlusconi's Forza Italia/PdL vehicles, did without them entirely. Here, all initiative came from the leader-owners of its web platforms, who blocked dissenters at will and asked no more of their online fans than to ratify their decisions.

M5S referendums are characterized by low turnout, a lack of collective discussion, and obedience to incoherent and opportunistic zigzags. In 2017, when Beppe Grillo decided to draw M5S into the liberal, Euro-federalist ALDE group (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) in the European Parliament, 78 percent of those who voted said yes. After ALDE said no, M5S swung back into the arms of Nigel Farage. This was replicated after the 2018 general election, as Di Maio negotiated with both the Democrats and the Lega to form a government. When M5S supporters were consulted on Di Maio's hitherto undisclosed deal with Salvini, there were fewer than twenty-four hours between the calling of the referendum and the close of voting. He, however, secured a 94 percent "yes" vote, on a 40 percent turnout.

This was quite a mandate, given M5S's [long-standing sharp criticisms](#) of the Lega. But if the new pact was labeled a "contract" rather than a "coalition," it immediately and definitively bound M5S's hands. In the election, the Lega had surpassed Forza Italia for the first time, and over the next weeks it rallied the whole Right behind its leadership, aided by the president's decision to block its provocative Eurosceptic choice for economy minister. From then on, the Lega's polling lead allowed it to dominate, using the blackmail of exploding the coalition to push a hard-line nationalist agenda. While M5S was never a strong pro-refugee party, today it trails along, half embarrassed, behind a far-right policy that dominates government business.

Zero Mandate

With his party in crisis, Di Maio last week moved to centralize control, with a raft of changes to M5S's rules. From the start, the party railed against "career politicians," associated with a supposedly pervasive corruption as well as what the M5S terms "ideology" (any ideas apart from its own much-vaunted "common sense"). On the principle that "anyone's view counts as much as any other," it proclaimed that it would destroy the "caste" of professional politicians, journalists, and trade union leaders, instead promoting "outsiders" who would be allowed to spend no more than two terms in office. Bizarre tools like "[neuro-linguistic programming](#)" (and literal hypnosis) would further serve to keep its MPs and senators on a tight leash.

The measures now proposed by Di Maio are intended to water down this "differentness" and give M5S's frontmen more leeway. Already, with the statute he introduced in 2017, a significant transfer of power took place within M5S, with its parliamentary leadership taking control from figures like Grillo as well as its online support base. The marketing machine Gianroberto Casaleggio had built around Beppe Grillo's blog — in the late 2000s, one of the world's most visited websites — was shifted to M5S's own website, and Grillo's role as "guarantor" of the party constitution was sidelined. With the financial interests of the party's owner Casaleggio Associates in play, M5S also dropped its practice of livestreaming its talks with other parties.

These moves proved useful when it came to the post-election negotiations with Salvini. Indeed, a year into these parties' pact, Di Maio's latest proposals formally abandon M5S's repudiation of coalitions, while also undermining the two-term limit the party previously imposed on its representatives. Those who have served as an M5S local councillor will now be able to "discount" one of their terms, thus allowing them to stand for election for a third time. In a laughable video, much derided on social media, Di Maio packaged this as the "introduction of a 'zero' mandate" — a simple declaration that one of the terms would "not count" . . . for some reason. It seems an M5S that brandishes its commitment to propriety and straight-talking can itself be rather loose with the rules.

Out of Office

M5S supporters are due to ratify these measures in an online referendum — not that there's any way they could propose an alternative. The party's embrace of the Lega's policies and watering down of its distinctive traits has not produced any notable revolt within its ranks; its voters also seem not to have migrated to anti-racist or anti-austerity parties, instead taking refuge in abstention. Some enthusiasts hope that M5Sers skeptical of the Lega, such as parliamentary speaker Roberto Fico (not part of the government), or its "activist face" Alessandro Di Battista (no longer an elected official), can recover the movement's lost "soul." Yet the overall trend is mere disillusionment.

This is already visible at the municipal level, where it has failed to sink lasting roots. As with other "big new things" of 1990s-2000s Italian politics, M5S's first wave of breakthrough candidates are instead already in jeopardy. Its first mayor, Federico Pizzarotti, elected in Parma in 2012, does remain in post, but he was expelled from M5S in 2016 after coming under police investigation for abuse of office. Another prominent early winner, Filippo Nogarini (elected mayor of "red" Livorno in 2014, after being supported by left-wing lists in the second round), was himself embroiled in scandal and refused to stand in this June's election, where M5S drew just 16 percent support.

Similar troubles face M5S's most prominent mayors: Turin's Chiara Appendino and Rome's Virginia Raggi, each elected in 2016 but today on the brink of collapse. Already, early in her term, Appendino faced an embezzlement inquiry, and more recent setbacks for her rule include both the loss (to Milan) of the Piedmontese capital's multi-million-euro auto show, and Prime Minister Conte's public embrace of the TAV project. The protests against this Turin to Lyon rail line had been an early focus of M5S's own campaigning in this city; Appendino maintains she is still opposed to the plan but

“M5S don’t have 51 percent of seats” and are thus, she claims, unable to block it.

Such impotence also characterizes Raggi’s rule in Rome — a rare site of setbacks for M5S in its otherwise successful 2018 general election campaign. Having harshly denounced her PD predecessor Ignazio Marino’s parking offenses, Raggi’s collapse began immediately after she took office, as an investigation into her handling of public tenders forced M5S to abandon its commitment to expel officials who came under police inquiry. While Raggi was ultimately cleared, the image of hypocrisy stuck. Moreover, Raggi’s inaction over Rome’s mounting garbage crisis, as well as an alarming spate of bus fires and metro station disasters, have trashed her reputation.

For now, M5S most of all fears a fresh reckoning with the voters, and thus seeks to differentiate itself from Salvini without provoking an open split. This has led to many incoherent moves, not least in July, when M5S and the Lega took opposite sides in the vote on the new European Commission president. Di Maio’s party joined the main centrist blocs in backing German Christian-Democrat Ursula von der Leyen; Salvini, whose MEPs voted against, accused M5S of “governing with the PD” in Brussels. Di Maio’s party has long since abandoned its one-time promises to shake up the European Union (and purely opportunistic calls for a referendum on euro exit). Now it votes along with the extreme center in Brussels, even as it enforces a far-right agenda at home.

If Italy does head for early elections, polls suggest that many of the M5S MPs elected in its 2013 breakthrough performance will indeed have no third term in office. A movement widely heralded as marking the end of party politics has instead highlighted the purely destructive role of judicial populism, which has denied it the identity, the local roots, or the program for social change that would have allowed it to resist the Lega’s own more coherent agenda. Salvini’s current dominance may not be as total as it seems: the volatile state of Italian politics makes it hard to predict that his success over the last year will endure for much longer than his predecessors’. But if, and when, Salvini does lose his aura of success, it’s hard to see the M5S counting among the beneficiaries.

David Broder is a historian of French and Italian communism. He is currently writing a book on the crisis of Italian democracy in the post-Cold War period.

David Broder

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Jacobin Magazine

<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/08/italy-five-star-movement-matteo-salvini-m5s-lega>