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Italy

A new centre-right government is born

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This is a political assessment by Communia Network of the new Lega/Five Star Movement government in Italy. It expands, partly repeating, the earlier article by Salvatore Cannavo from *Il Fatto Quotidiano* “[A new centre-right \(with a hyphen\) is born](#)”. [IVP]

The Conte government is the first government of a new Italian centre-right. A centre-right which to be precise has to be defined as hyphenated – bringing together distinct political currents. The right wing is clearly represented and proudly invoked by Matteo Salvini and partly by the abstention of Giorgia Meloni and her Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) party which is the most coherent and direct orphan of what was Gianfranco Fini's MSI (Italian Social Movement) before the turn to form Alleanza nazionale (National Alliance). The centre – which is *sui generis* because it is not evident nor claimed but hidden behind the generic formula of “neither right nor left” – is represented by Di Maio's M5S (Five Star Movement).

We have already come to define the M5S as a party – the “catch-all” party defined by Otto Kirchheimer. Defining it as a movement or some sort of nebula on the web should be completely dropped since its entry to the government.

The M5S is a party that tries to appeal across the board, across social classes. It is particularly attractive to a middle layer hit hard by the crisis, which has become poorer and today expresses the highest levels of social resentment. But it also appeals to a sector of working people, especially in the public sector.

Such a demographic is not so different from the social base that characterised the old DC (Christian Democrats) and to which Luigi Di Maio's project has often been compared. It is the “yellow whale” of our time. [1] It is characterised by indignation and a desire for change but this is mixed – and the longest crisis of the Republic has shown it – with an institutional reflex, an appetite for power and an arrogant management of internal debate.

The M5S has put into the government programme key measures from its manifesto, in prime position, the citizens' income proposal. It is no accident that Di Maio has taken on the portfolio for the ministry that will apply this change. The policy has the M5S trademark and he will be able to pin this medal on his chest and display it at the next elections. Assuming of course that the income is actually introduced since it has to be compatible with the EU financial strictures that Sergio Mattarella has succeeded in imposing on the government team.

The Five Star centre comes up against the right wing led by Salvini. The Lega is a right wing party that is xenophobic, nationalist and in favour of some social reforms but neo-liberal at the same time (therefore the latter is just demagogy). It has disturbing relationships with people like Marine Le Pen and Steve Bannon. So no longer like the right wing Lega Nord led by Umberto Bossi that was also racist but more moderate about it, partly because the economic situation at the time favoured that approach. Bossi's Lega also inherited some of the DC tradition but today Salvini's Lega expresses a coherent, nasty and full-on racism. This wins him support and we can only respond to it by campaigning for the key value of solidarity between human beings as the one and only means of guaranteeing all people can live together in a civic manner. We need the expansion of real social rights against the overwhelming power of markets and capital. Salvini's policies are incubating civil war and endless conflict as history has already taught us. Also as we see today everywhere in the world where global contradictions – and migration is a contradiction that involves us all – are managed through the dog whistle solution of our nation first whipped up against any number of scapegoats – black people, Arabs, Roma, sometimes Jews. In other words policies that basically restrict the rights of everybody

The Lega and M5S are saying that they are making history, that it will be a government of change, while at the same

A new centre-right government is born

time nominating Conte, a great friend of Confindustria (the Italian employers' organization) as the new prime minister. The lawyer who represented Andreotti (and defended Ghedini, Berlusconi's counsel) is the new minister of justice, a professor who is a consultant to Forza Italia is the new economics minister, and the Lega leader, Salvini, is the new minister of the interior. Matteo Renzi, leader of the PD, has said he is happy just to observe them all and says he has prepared popcorn for the show. Berlusconi (while not voting for the new government) is withholding his veto as long as they do not disturb his interests. At the same time both of these leaders now out of power look enviously at Macron's France. Politicians who were mainly responsible for government policies in recent years and the mainstream media have been making not very credible appeals for the defence of democracy against the "new barbarians" but are simply offering a Europe of austerity. Among those remaining left political currents closest to us there is above all disorientation and an understandable apprehension.

Undoubtedly the "Salvimaio" government is pushing the Five Star movement strongly to the right with the result that a third of the country is now in the hands of the most totally and aggressively racist party. The Lega is the real winner of the programmatic debate because the Flat Tax and the security policies have a much greater weight in the "Government contract" than the watered down Citizens' Income and the environmental proposals championed by M5S. The whole political operation is more risky for the Five Star movement than for the Lega which has a Plan B if things do not work out – in other words they can go back into the centre right framework. Di Maio however has to deal with a part of his electorate that comes from the left. But at the end of the day what has prevailed inside the Five Star movement has been the need it has felt to go into government now and to do so with a force that, like them, is considered to be external to the establishment that has governed for the last 25 years. This is the reality underpinning the fact that after dozens of years of minority governments we now have a government that starts out with the broadest popular support since the time of the First Republic, with opinion surveys suggesting 6 out of 10 Italians have great hopes in it.

The famous contract for government has put together very diverse positions. There are some demands that the Five Star Movement has taken from popular movements that have been watered down such as a partial "no" to the high speed rail link between Turin and France, the renationalization of water and the citizens' income. Also we have a vein of Keynesian policy running through it with the opening up the idea of deficit spending. But at the same time there is the out and out neo-liberalism of the Flat Tax and the racist and repressive policies with regard to repatriation, the Roma, mosques and welfare to go only to Italians. This is a rather "macho" government which tends to see women only as mothers to be looked after, or in terms of tougher sentences for sexual violence, but without challenging existing culture or structures. It is a government unconcerned about civil rights, which will make women pay for a traditionalist family model, and when it proposes some new welfare policy at the same time links it firmly to institutional racism against non-Italian families.

On the other hand the intention of abolishing the Jobs Act or re-establishing article 18 (protects workers to some extent against arbitrary sacking) has been dropped while the reintroduction of the voucher system regulating temporary or precarious work has been proposed. The latter change has led the shadow minister of labour designated by Di Maio during the electoral campaign, Pasquale Tridico, to voice dissent. He seems to be one of the few voices raised in protest within what appears to be a practically monolithic M5S.

The whole project is rather fragile. This is partly because of the way the leaders are accused of not being credible because they have to find 100 billion euros for their programme. But a redistribution of a 100 billion would be the minimum required to make it a real change in government. The problem is not really one of numbers but of political direction. If you establish a partial citizens' income and revise the Fornero pension law while installing a fiscal paradise for the rich with the Flat Tax it will be difficult to avoid making cuts to education, health and welfare. Implementing new property taxes would also seem difficult to integrate into the programme. The idea of not paying in some way a part of the debt had been quickly removed from the contract by the EU loyalist Mattarella. For these reasons the overall project is fragile. Its weakness combined with the broad popular support it has at the moment could make it even more dangerous because the probable difficulties on the economic front could make it even more

A new centre-right government is born

aggressive in its repressive, hard line security and migrant policies.

Today it is difficult to define analytically this recipe for government that makes Italy yet another political laboratory in these volatile times. Are we facing a Peronism, Italian style? Is it more similar to a Putin type government to which both leaders have some sympathy? Or is it simply smoke and mirrors since we may see substantial continuity with previous governments, as has already been demonstrated with the Five Star administrations in several big cities?

This liquid movement has not evaporated and its broad popular support derives from the crisis of the ruling class; resentment against those who have managed the redistribution of wealth upwards in the last decade of crisis and on the effectiveness of a narrative where a “people” emptied of any class specificity and gender (but definitely of a white race) is pitched against an elite that is also freed of any class framework. One elite is simply to be replaced by another who demands a total delegation in governing the “new” – only because it is against the “old”.

As we have seen in the political conditions leading to this government it is especially the “old” politics that is the real strength of the yellow-green alliance (respective M5S/Lega party colours). The various oppositions to it are only likely to reinforce it. In any case this government was not the only possible outcome of the 4 March elections. It was desired, even more strongly than by the two victors, by the parties who suffered the biggest defeat. Those people now wish to lead a “responsible opposition”. For decades the PD told us that we must do everything to defeat the right (including by adopting its programme) but now all they fear is an early election which would see a large number of constituencies having a run-off between the Five Star movement and the Lega, with a further collapse in the PD and Forza Italia vote. So nothing else is proposed except to keep a watching brief and hope the government will collapse on its own.

We have no desire to have a watching brief. And we are not interested in any opposition which links up with those who have implemented austerity. At the same time it is not enough simply to be more radical.

We sense that we will not succeed in weakening the popular support for this government only by highlighting the most reactionary and fascist elements of its policies – something we will nevertheless be forcefully doing. Also it is not very effective to list all those demands that – having created illusions among left voters – have been partially or completely betrayed by the Five Star movement. It is not enough to denounce the limited changes to the Fornero law or the reduction in the Citizens’ Income or the way it is conditioned by the requirement to accept any type of work.

What is really needed to build an opposition to this government is above all to reconstruct a counter-narrative of reality and to develop new forms of direct democracy and effective social conflict. We must combat the ill defined notion of a People full of rancour that is drawn into a war between poor people. We have to once again make a new class analysis of society where workers, unemployed and those in precarious jobs are in unavoidable conflict with those who will benefit from the Flat Tax. Women, migrants and students do not have the same interests as those who own productive and financial capital and make money from the so called “made in Italy” brand.

If you talk about conflict with the well-off elite while denying class divisions then it is easy to slip into a war between poor people where migrants, those in precarious work, Rom, women, often suffer the worst. Opposition to this government must base itself on its social contradictions and work out how to counterpose credible mutualism and solidarity to any war between poor people. At the same time we need to know how to build social conflicts and forms of democracy that are radically different from those of the old methods of a political left that has been already defeated.

Politics is in disorder, the ruling class is in evident disarray, the dynamics of public opinion are undoubtedly volatile and the political protagonists that we see today could soon disappear or undergo re-composition. Given this period of

A new centre-right government is born

epochal crisis if we do not try and deal with the fundamental issues – rebuilding social bases, developing real conflicts, engaging in processes of self-organisation and new politicization – then it will be like preparing ourselves for the next phase of struggle by sitting on the sofa eating popcorn.

A worse error is the absurd proposal of Carlo Calenda [ex minister in the previous government] for a republican front. The word front says it all – frontism against Berlusconi's centre right buried the left, imagine how it might work against the new centre-right.

3 June 2018

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[1] Christian Democracy was known as the “white whale”).