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Italy elections

Democratic space reduced, Italian government given breathing space

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As expected the constitutional referendum to reduce the number of MPs in both houses by a third passed by 70 per cent to 30 per cent. This means an Italian MP will represent up to 150,000 voters, the highest in Europe and considerably more than here [United Kingdom]. Democratic space and access is severely reduced and it makes it even more difficult for new or smaller parties, particularly alternative left wing or ecological ones, to be represented.

An attack on democratic rights is successful

Nevertheless 70 per cent contrasts with the 95 per cent vote in parliament by all the official parties in favour of the reform. After the results the Five Star Movement (M5S) leader, Di Maio, focussed entirely on the success of the reform his movement had been championing for 10 years. He was careful not to mention the rather poor results his movement won in the regional and local elections where their score was generally 50 per cent or more down on their 33 per cent which propelled them into government in 2018. Given the relentless austerity managed by both the supposed 'left of centre' parties, primarily the Democratic Party (PD), and the right wing alongside the endemic corruption and popular rage against MPs luxurious expenses, it is not surprising that a big majority voted Yes. The M5S campaign against a political caste abstracted from any system of exploitation or the state apparatus has had an effect. The rise of Salvini's Lega and of Berlusconi before him also channelled disillusionment with these career politicians who reigned from Rome. Even the vote to cull the caste reflects a big fall in citizen participation in politics - nearly 50 per cent abstained. The effects of the Covid pandemic and putting the vote on the same day as the regional and local elections meant the big debate on the constitutional change never really began.

The Right fails to land its punches

The battle for the six regional governments (the Aosta special region also voted and was won by the right) ended in a score draw, 3-3. Tuscany and Puglia were the two key marginals that initial exit polls suggested were close. They ended up being clearly won by the centre left 48-40 and 46.9-38.9 respectively. After the failure to win Emilia Romagna pre-lockdown Salvini's confident prediction that he could storm the 'red' strongholds has slithered to a halt. All the incumbents won and where the governors were seen to have taken a firm grasp on controlling the Covid Pandemic - De Luca for the left in Campania (Naples region) and Zaio, for the right in the Venice region - they won with around 70 per cent of the votes. The one region that changed hands was the Marche (the area behind Ancona) where the post-fascist Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) won 49-37 - it had been governed for 25 years by the left of centre. Many commentators had suggested that if Tuscany and Puglia had fallen to the right then the government could well have gone into crisis and certainly Zingaretti would have had to resign as PD leader. The PD vote held up well and its weight in the coalition will be strengthened. So the government looks safe for the moment and could well serve out its full term, another two years. Prime Minister Conte, who deliberately kept quiet and above the fray during the election, immediately made a post-election intervention proclaiming the stability of the government. But there remain four serious challenges for the ruling PD/M5S coalition which can still result in a victory for a right wing coalition at the next general election.

Recovery in whose interests?

Firstly, there is the deepening recession whose devastating effects on employment and living standards will begin to hit hard this autumn as the Italian equivalent of furlough comes to an end. Although the EU has assigned a considerable amount to the government's Recovery Fund this is not without any strings and the country already had one of the biggest deficit/debt to GDP ratio in Europe even before Covid. The bosses confederation is keen for the money to go to help companies modernise and restructure and for the state to provide infrastructure that will benefit profits. There is no significant political force that defends the interests of working people. The PD was the most enthusiastic support of EU constrained funds and has had little to say about how working people will be protected. All the debate in these elections focussed on the constitutional change or mostly on regional or local issues - how 'our area' was going to compete for resources from the government or the EU. Building a class struggle opposition to the government on post-Covid recovery had hardly any hearing at all.

Five Star Movement fragmenting and in decline

Secondly, despite their 'historic' victory in cutting the number of MPs there is a collapse in the M5S vote and its developing split. Unless there is an unlikely leap forward in PD support the numbers just are not there to defeat the right at any upcoming election. The fundamentalist wing, led by Di Battista, is very sceptical of alliances with any party and wants to maintain the 'purity' of the movement around issues like limiting the number of terms a representative can serve. During the election for example he campaigned for the M5S candidate in Puglia who had refused any deal with the PD for a common slate. A number of the local M5S MPs campaigned for that slate rather than for the M5S candidate. Similar situations existed elsewhere. Dozens of MPs and Senators are with Di Battista. Zingaretti rather naively suggested if there had been a unified slate everywhere then all six regions would have been won. Maybe he had not checked that they did just as badly where there was a joint slate - in Liguria (Genova area). In fact the score draw is partly explained by split voting, many M5S voters chose the centre left slate for governor and their party slate for the regional MPs. Whether this would work in a general election is more doubtful although Conte has taken note of this and it may well be he could work up his own political current in any upcoming public vote. He would receive serious help from the business establishment and the EU.

Electoral Reform...again

Thirdly there is the thorny question of reforming the electoral system, a process that has been dragging on since the end of the traditional party system based on Christian Democracy and the old Communist party. I was struck by how all the journalist pundits on the Corriere delle Sera TV elections special kept on about the need for a form of first past the post so that 'Italians would know who was in government on the same day as the election'. Obviously they are not concerned about the fairness of political representation for smaller parties. Any electoral system that did not include a form of PR (at least with a threshold of 5 per cent) would be suicidal for parties like the M5S with their present level of support, for Renzi's Italia Viva party and for LEU (Liberty and Equality party) who are all in the current government. Government crises linked to changing the electoral system are not unknown.

Right remains strong and Salvini stumbles

Finally the right wing might not have delivered a body blow but they still control 15 regions and are more united than the left of centre. Their electoral support more or less held up and in a national election would appear to constitute a majority. However there are several years in which new configurations in the centre of Italian politics could change that. Inside the right there is a continuing political recomposition with the continued rise of Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia and

particularly her personal ratings. Salvini took over the leadership of the right from Berlusconi but now is being challenged by Meloni. His star has waned a little since he is no longer 'capitano' minister of the interior on the front line against the so-called 'migrant invasion'. Covid and local /regional issues dominated these elections rather than migrants. His flippancy about the pandemic has lost him some support. Even within the Lega he is faced with the rise in popularity of Zaio, the Veneto governor whose slate won three times the votes of the Salvini for Prime Minister one. No doubt the upcoming trial of Salvini for misconduct in office over refusing a migrant ship entry to Italian ports will provide him with the necessary circus of protest he needs to put himself at the centre again.

What about the left of the PD?

Unfortunately it is very weak. The focus of many of their activists is about getting an electoral slate together rather than serious work in the community and the workplaces. Sometimes this obsession means joining in slates led by the PD. These elections once again show the futility of this approach. Moreover the groups are fragmented and fail to get together in activity or elections. This was overcome to some degree in Tuscany where Toscana a Sinistra (Tuscany on the Left) which grouped together forces like Sinistra Anticapitalista (Anticapitalista Left) and Rifondazione (Refounding Communism) did get nearly 3 per cent. Even there another two communist slates got another a few percentage points. I witnessed a fairly dynamic campaign by Potere al Popolo (Power to the People) in a town near Naples but it stood alone and got just over 1 per cent - similar to their Governor candidate. They raised the opposition to the constitutional change but a lot of their campaign seemed to emphasise their youth and purely local issues, there was nothing about building a nationwide class struggle opposition. We can only hope that the scale of the attacks on working people will provoke some opposition in the workplaces and the communities where the class struggle left can begin to rebuild a political opposition.

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