

Italy's post-electoral intrigues shed light on the country's political culture



Following difficult negotiations in the aftermath of the Italian election on 4 March, Italy's President, Sergio Mattarella, has stated the country has two options: a neutral 'technical' government, or new elections. [Roland Benedikter](#) writes that the situation points toward prolonged instability and more short-term arrangements rather than the stable reform alliance which the country urgently needs.



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Italy's election on 4 March was a clear shift to the right and a (temporary) end to the classical Italian "50:50 society" which, following the Second World War, was in a constant stalemate between the centre-right and centre-left, causing notoriously poor governability for the country. The centre-right coalition, including Matteo Salvini's Lega and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, won the largest share of the vote ahead of Luigi Di Maio's Five Star Movement, which considers itself 'post-ideological', and neither left nor right, while the centre-left, led by the Democratic Party (PD), was relegated to a distant third place out of the three major players.

But despite this result, Italy's most notorious problem of insecure and prematurely failing governments – with an average time in charge of less than two years despite being elected for five – has apparently not been solved. No coalition has yet been found and there are deep divisions between all camps – and, as is traditional, within all camps as well.

Salvini proposed a government with the Five Star Movement, but this arrangement according to Salvini's wish had to include his closest ally Berlusconi. Di Maio refused since, in his view, "this would not be revolution, but restoration since Berlusconi is the past". On the other hand, Di Maio's attempt to forge a government with the remnants of Matteo Renzi's left failed: Renzi, who behind the curtains is working on his comeback as party leader and as a potential new government member after new elections, considers any governmental participation of the left with the winning centre-right coalition to be "the definitive end of the Italian left".

At the same time, the centre-right was both reluctant to form a government at all because it hoped to further expand its winning margin after new elections, and was simultaneously inclined to get a government in place since the vote on 4 March was heavily influenced by the so-called "Macerata attack": a right-wing attack on migrants by a former Lega member. The attack, which was stated to be in response to the murder of a local woman, inflamed right-wing sentiments all over Italy – new elections will presumably be held under different circumstances.

The fact that in mid-April Italy's president Sergio Mattarella gave the mandate for exploratory talks to forge a coalition to the representative of the weakest faction of the winning centre-right coalition, i.e. Elisabetta Casellati of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, with the consent of the winners (the Five Star Movement and the Lega), was a clear sign that few want a stable and enduring government, paradoxically not even the winners of the election. That was also expressed through Mattarella's [own expectation](#) that he thought this could be no more than an intermediate or provisional government (governo di traghettamento), stating that it would be seen later on how the situation would further develop – a typically Italian arrangement which has frequently been seen in the last 70 years.

In fact, in Italy the invitation to form a government is, in the first instance, often a trap put forward by coalition partners. The assignment is not necessarily given to the strongest faction in parliament, but often conceded to minor players, so that the stronger coalition parties can control them without taking over too much responsibility, always ready to step in when they think the moment is right. That is what is meant in Italy by the notion of “consociational democracy” which is not based on binding governmental coalition programmes but rather on fluid party and personal agreements strongly related to momentum and events. This “culture of relations” (cultura degli incuci) is one reason why the average Italian government does not reach half of its formal time in charge.

The case of a winning centre-right coalition being so reluctant to form a functioning government is unusual in the eyes of a majority of the European public, yet deeply characteristic of Italian political culture. The present situation now sees the Democratic Party at odds with itself and paralysed by internal squabbling following their catastrophic defeat; an all too principled Di Maio wanting to form a German-style government with a binding five-year programme, that most others do not want and that is not usual in Italy; and the moderate Conservatives of Forza Italia still struggling with the Berlusconi problem, while Salvini's Lega is wedded to strict tax cuts that favour northern Italy and uncompromising deportation policies that it will be difficult to find a compromise on. The left can't take power, and the right is reluctant to do so because it hopes to further profit from new elections.

Meanwhile, with no stable government in sight, the problems the country faces are serious. For example, leading Mafia expert Roberto Saviano in a new book estimates that around 80% of the “migration business” in the Mediterranean is in the hands of the Italian Mafia. Worth at least 60 billion euros a year, this is arguably a more lucrative and ‘ethical’ trade than drugs or arms trafficking and it is employing a growing number of the southern Italian youth who are becoming existentially dependent on the continuous stream of illegal migrants.

And given the absence of state power, ‘shadow powers’ as they are called in Italy can expand their outreach. [Italian army general Vincenzo Santo](#) has observed that he believes the flow of migrants in the Mediterranean is being [controlled from Italy's coastlines](#). With no government in sight, the issue remains ‘suspended’ – and will continue to play into the hands of the right.

What is the outlook?

President Sergio Mattarella at the start of May announced that he will issue new elections if no sustainable governing coalition is found. On 8 May he announced that he would favour a ‘technical’ government consisting of a ‘provisional’ arrangement of experts not elected by the people. It is clear that any such arrangement, [which went poorly during the last technical government led by Mario Monti](#), would not help alleviate the sense of a crisis of democracy and of liberal society in southern Europe.

Whatever the outcome, it is probable that the new government will not last more than a short period of time. This is what those who form it themselves expect. New elections would probably further strengthen the centre-right and the populist right, and thus weaken the pro-European camp since the migration topic is far from being solved.

One thing which is clear it is that the migration topic will further influence the political picture in Italy, as all newspapers and analysts agree, “it is the one clear dominating topic – shown by the fact that [even those who vote for the left are anxious about immigration and afraid of migrants](#)”. This means that [Italy's migration crisis remains a fundamental threat to the European Union project](#) since it undermines the trust of Italian voters in the governing capacities of the EU, including the protection of Europe's outer borders, the principle of an internal borderless Schengen zone and the solidarity principle in general. Yet the far-reaching importance of the topic is still underappreciated by EU elites in Brussels.

A second fundamental challenge for the coming years is pursuing the reforms the country needs. Despite a moderate growth outlook of 1.6 percent for 2018 (25th of 28 EU nations, EU overall prediction 2.5 percent) the gap between North and South continues to be a dividing factor manifesting two profoundly different countries. While the reform jam remains unsolved, [Matteo Renzi's reform programme of 2014-16](#) remains the only coherent, overarching and coordinated proposal as of yet. What is urgently needed is a university, science and research offensive; a reduction in bureaucracy; a reform of the justice system; and a simplification and reform of the taxation system.

Yet Matteo Renzi's reform policies failed with his referendum defeat on 4 December 2016: [a constitutional referendum](#) that included far-reaching changes. Renzi's policies were partly continued by his successor and current premier Paolo Gentiloni, yet in essence – as usual in Italy – reforms were not implemented, but rather 'suspended' indefinitely, the classic Italian solution. But one way or another, these reforms have to be enacted – probably with the exception of the proposed move from citizenship by birth (*lex sanguinis*) to a citizenship by "culture" and residence (*lex solis, lex culturae*). This would have provided immediate citizenship for up to 7 million migrants and non-Italians and was rejected by the vast majority of Italian voters – the main reason for Renzi's catastrophic defeat.

There are many options for how reforms could be achieved despite the anarchic situation: whether Renzi himself tries to push them forward behind the curtains, others carry them forward under the radar, or the EU proposes them externally. The Five Star Movement will play an important role in this over the coming years, since it has until now considered Renzi to be its main adversary, if not the enemy of all innovative Italian politicians.

[All this matters for greater Europe](#) because Italy remains both regionally and globally important. This historical moment for Italy is both worrying and favourable in equal measure: while Italy is overwhelmed with unregulated migration that is perceived by the public to be partly irreversible and threatening the fundamentals of the political order; at the same time, due to Brexit, Italy has been upgraded to the third-most important nation in the EU. And Italy's weight is destined to increase over the coming years.

Italy's inability to form a government despite a clear win for the centre-right, a clear parliamentary majority and the unmistakable will of the voting public should raise alarm bells in Europe. It is necessary for any new government, be it short or long-term, to start to change the political culture of the nation towards stability and continuity. And it is equally necessary for the European Union to show more commitment to securing Europe's outer borders and to providing more help to Italy in confronting its migration problem if it wants stability on its southern shores. All of this presupposes that the EU redefines its identity as one rooted in '[precious diversity](#)' rather than the one-sided cosmopolitanism which has been the norm in recent years.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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