

Scrambling the Political Eggs

Judith Harris (April 22, 2012)



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ROME - Speaking of revolution, it was Lenin who said that if you want to make an omelette, you must be willing to break a few eggs. In its own way Italy is making a revolution, if only by scrambling the eggs.

The second Republic—brought about by the scandals of Operation Clean Hands back in the early Nineties—is fading fast into an unknown third, and Premier Mario Monti's government is facing obstacles that not even his considerable skills may be able to overcome. Weaker by the day, his cabinet of professorial experts has soldiered on bravely, and was widely expected to remain in office until the natural end of the five-year legislature in mid-2013. But suddenly the political winds have changed, and today's conventional wisdom is that national general political elections may take place



this coming October. Here's why.

First, alienation. "It's a divorce between the government and the country," sentenced Pier Luigi Bersani the other day. Most pollsters agree that the number of those alienated from the mainstream political class has risen to the point that those who say they will not go to the polls or turn in blank ballots, has risen to around 45% of the electorate; some say up to 60%. Because no one knows which establishment party will suffer most from the predicted tsunami of defections, all are running equally scared, fearing that worse may be in store.

Secondly, a photo-finish looming between the big two parties. Silvio Berlusconi's Partito della Libertà (PDL) can claim just 24.9% of the electorate, but Bersani's left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD), which represents the progressive trade union CGIL, has slipped ahead, with % in the most recent poll, according to the respected Swg. However, another pollster, IPSOS, puts the PDL further down, at just over 22%.

Third, Beppe Grillo. The comedian cum political guru Grillo has surged in popularity, to the point his Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Stars Movement) party is, for the first time in history, the third largest in Italy. In the polls (again, Swg) Grillo has bounced ahead of the Northern League, surging to 7.2% by comparison with Umberto Bossi's Northern League, with 7.1%.

Certainly Grill's anti-party party is growing by the day, as he campaigns vigorously in the big and smaller towns of Italy, from Sicily to Como in the North this past weekend.

Fourth, the Northern League. The scandals have taken their toll. This weekend the party founder and grand old ailing man Umberto Bossi, referring to his inner "magic circle" as it is being called, acknowledged that he is "ashamed," but that "the people understand." The latest shock, after the revelations of publicly donated party funds whisked into private pockets, was that a senior aide to Bossi had paid a private investigator to snoop into the doings of the party's second-in-command, "Bobo" Maroni, who just happened to be Interior Minister in the Berlusconi government at that time. In an attempt at damage control, Bossi showed up at a party rally Saturday where Maroni was speaking. They exchanged theatrical hugs.

Fifth, scandals. No party is free of accusations of corruption, the daily fare of the media from right to left. In addition there is sex: the week's testimony by ex-Premier Berlusconi is literally hair-raising. Explaining why he provided huge sums of cash to women revealed as prostitutes (unbeknownst to him if to no one else), he said things like he wanted to help Ruby the heart-stealer (Ruby Rubacuore), the fake adult and fake Egyptian, because she was a Catholic convert and needed money to avoid becoming a prostitute. The girls at his party were not really dressed like nuns but wearing a wardrobe of sexy outfits that Gaddafi had given him as a present (!)

Sixth, anger at Monti. The reality of Premier Monti's measures is beginning to sink in. Huge tax hikes will be applied by October on home ownership, gasoline, highway tolls, household utilities and other essentials, for circa 45% of income. Moreover, tens of thousands of the middle-aged who accepted early retirement in exchange for a pension have found themselves unemployed but with no income whatsoever because the Monti government raised the pensionable age.

Given this truly worrisome situation, the establishment parties are doing their best to try to give themselves a new look. They need to: local administrative elections loom May 6 and 7 and will provide an even more precise picture of the voters' mood. Altogether, 1,014 townships throughout Italy will go to the polls. They include, in the South, Palermo and Taranto and, in the North, Genoa, Verona, Monza and Piacenza. Twenty-eight are provincial capitals with over 100,000 inhabitants. Sicily has 149 townships summoned to vote while the Valle d'Aosta (which votes later, on May 27) has only one. The tiniest is the hamlet of Montelapiana in the Abruzzo, home to just 77.

In a belated attempt at damage control, the general secretary of the PDL Angelino Alfano appealed to the League to run a joint platform for the May elections, but Bossi would have none of it: "We're better off alone than with bad company," he said without bothering to appear gracious to his former bedfellow in government.



Behind the scenes there is movement, not surprisingly. Silvio Berlusconi seems to be planning to dissolve his PDL for a startup new party with a brand new name and, to this end, is courting the wealthy industrialist Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, 64. Former chairman of Fiat and today president of Ferrari, Montezemolo is rumored to aspire to the premiership of Italy. A name for Berlusconi's proposed new party? Until a few months ago it was Il Partito dell'amore (the party of love) but today the gossip has it that this is not patriotic enough so it will be along the lines of the party that loves Italy.

Meantime, Pierferdinando Casini is struggling to launch a new "Third Pole" party—this because neither to the right like Berlusconi nor to the left like Bersani—that will bring together centrists under a name on the lines of Pole of Nations or Pole for Italy. With him would be Gianfranco Fini and Francesco Rutelli.

And so the search is on for a new name, a new party, and a few new faces, but so far it is mostly a scrambling of the same old eggs.

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