

Italy's New President: Judge Sergio Mattarella

Judith Harris (January 31, 2015)



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ROME – It so is over, and quickly. The twelfth president of the Italian Republic is Sergio Mattarella, 74, constitutional court judge and former cabinet minister. The victory of this former Christian Democrat (DC), who won by 665 votes after only four ballots, brings to a felicitous end a political battle which had presented grave risks. Of 1,008 possible electors (deputies, senators, lifetime senators, regional representatives), 995 took part, beginning at 9:30 am. Mattarella's election in an atmosphere of solemnity was confirmed at 1:30 pm with a standing ovation. The first telegram of congratulations arrived within minutes from Pope Francis.



The election, which required a simple majority of 550, strengthens the position of Matteo Renzi as both the head of government and head of his Partito Democratico (PD). At the same time it marks a signal setback for the right-wing Forza Italia (FI) headed by former Premier Silvio Berlusconi and a rap on the knuckles for Beppe Grillo's wild-card Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), whose candidate, Ferdinando Imposimato, was runner-up with 127 votes.

Renzi's coup was made possible by his making peace with his normally antagonistic PD left wing of party hacks, young Turks, trade unionists and old-guard former Communists. Renzi's leftwing of PD rebels had been infuriated by the so-called Nazareno Pact pact deal their leader had made with Berlusconi a year ago over major reforms. The PD vote for Mattarella was specifically against Berlusconi's express wishes, which left that Pact in the gutter, at least for now. For the same reason Mattarella attracted other votes from the left, such as from Nichi Vendola's Sinistra Ecologia Libertà' (SEL). For Vendola, Mattarella "is a transparent (limpido) figure both morally and politically."

As a former DC, Mattarella also attracted votes from such conservative parties as Scelta Civica. These center-right votes were deemed essential, given the risk that within the PD some might, in the secret ballot, ignore party orders. And in the end Renzi's governing partner Angelino Alfano and the Nuovo Centro Destra (NCD) agreed to vote for Mattarella.

Not least, the 20-some politicians who have either quit or been kicked out of Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) also rallied around Renzi's candidate. In short, in one fell swoop Renzi's choice of candidate outfoxed both Grillo and Berlusconi. Although with what future results for governing and the major pending reforms remains to be seen, today's election further postpones risk of early national general elections.

Inside the Forza Italia camp there was fury ("chaos," according to La Repubblica daily) at what was called Renzi's betrayal. Looking ahead, Silvio Berlusconi had cannily ordered his followers "out of respect for the office" to vote blank ballots rather than for the FI preferred contender, former Premier (and former Socialist) Giuliano Amato. In the event, results show that many in FI did not follow his lead. "One more autogol" (own goal), sentenced the head of a Berlusconi rebel faction, Raffaele Fitto.

It will not be easy for Berlusconi to rebuild his image; in case anyone had forgotten it, due to his sentence for tax fraud, Berlusconi had to race from Rome and its politicking Thursday after the first day's voting to return to Milan for his obligatory weekly community service in a home for the elderly.

Mattarella is a widower and lives extremely modestly in Rome, making regular weekend trips to his native Palermo to visit his children and grandchildren, and also to be coiffed by his favorite barber. Sobriety is his stock in trade; and in a tribute to Mattarella's soft-spoken and courteous manner and decorous lifestyle, one headline put it this way: "Grey is the new black." This was in its way Heckled loudly in a street one day, Mattarella turned to the man abusing him and said quietly, "Why shout? We can discuss this together." The heckler, taken aback, immediately turned quiet, and the two began a calm discussion.

Four generations of the Mattarella family have been in politics, and the family has been called the Kennedies of Sicily. His father, Bernardo, was a Christian Democratic politician in the get-rich-quick years of Palermo. His brother Piersanti became head of the Sicilian Region and was murdered at age 40 by the Mafia; only after this did Sergio himself pick up the reins and enter politics, on the left wing of the DC. The political tradition continued when Piersanti's son, named Bernardo for his grandfather, became a deputy in the regional government.

When the election process began three days ago, fears were of a repetition of the stalemate in 2013, when the then newly elected Parliament –the same as today's – was splintered into three, and the presidential election turned into an endless and inconclusive round of voting, resolved only by the re-election of President Giorgio Napolitano.



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