

President Mattarella and Italy - Plunging into 2018

Judith Harris (January 02, 2018)



In his New Year's speech President Sergio Mattarella praised Italy's politicians for having the legislature last the regulation 5 years. But in national general elections that take place in just 60 days, those with "institutional responsibilities" must each do his share, he said.

ROME -- Plunging into 2018, Italy has few certainties. The first is that national general elections will take place March 4, at the conclusion of the regularly scheduled five-year legislature, and under a new election law that harmonizes the vote for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. A second is that the Italian Constitution, voted 70 years ago, has withstood the test of time. The third and crucial consideration is that the country's guidance under [President Sergio Mattarella](#) [2] is a guarantee for the nation's democratic future, at a time when post-election coalition governments are impossible to predict.

Those elections are now only 60 days away. In what was one of the briefest year-end speeches ever delivered in Italian history, the President, speaking to the 10 million Italians who tuned their TV sets into his 10-minute New Year's Eve speech, called upon all the political parties involved in them to offer "adequate, realistic and concrete proposals." Italians vote at age 18, and Mattarella said he has confidence in those born in 1999 and voting for the first time: "I hope there will be a great participation." Still, he admitted concern over the risk of voter abstentionism, which could be high if



the politicians pay scant heed to the problems of youth, for whom unemployment is "foremost among the most serious social issues."

Mattarella had encouraging words for troubled times. "People have been talking about an Italy filled with resentment. For me that is not our nation, which in good measure is generous and shows solidarity. I have met so many people, proud to fulfill their duties and to help the needy." But in what amounted to a rap on the knuckles of the politicians leading the nation into the March elections, he concluded that the problems facing the nation will be overcome only if each does his share, beginning with those called upon to carry out their "institutional responsibilities."

At the same time, "Democracy lives by its commitment to the present but is nourished upon both memory and a vision of the future," he said. Analyzing Mattarella's words, opinionist Stefano Folli said that, "This year one senses a general concern for the near future, you intuit that the Quirinal Palace is the new political and institutional centerpiece of the system." It always was just this in the past, but now there is the sense that the "crucial choices for navigation" will be made there -- that is, by Mattarella.

Reactions from the political class were almost universally of praise. "These are words that do right by our democracy and in which we can all recognize ourselves and feel involved," said [Laura Boldrini](#) [3], president of the Chamber of Deputies, who just quit Matteo Renzi's Partito Democratico to join a new left splinter, Liberi e Uguali. [Susanna Camusso](#) [4], head of the CGIL union, seized upon the president's words about unemployment: "A job for every family -- a dignified job that always brings rights and security."

Nevertheless the comment by center-rightist [Renato Brunetta](#) [5] of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia suggested underlying anxiety. For the March election he hopes, he said, for "a great show of democracy and huge participation," and that the forthcoming Parliament will be able to express a majority "capable of governing."

The risk is of a three-way split with no single party or coalition achieving the necessary 40% for governing. Should that happen, and if no governing coalition is formed within a decent period, a second round of voting might be obliged in the autumn. A warning note is the German experience, where no new government has been formed in the three months since national general elections took place there last September.

At present Italy too faces a three-way split, with Movimento 5 Stelle in the lead with around 30%. The rightist coalition of Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Matteo Salvini's Northern League now claims about the same. Just below that in the polls (which do not all agree) is the center-left led by Matteo Renzi, former premier, but weakened by splinter left groups.

At the same time, not all the problems Italy faces are home grown. The lack of a pan-European approach to immigration is one. Another serious concern is that the former Communist states along with Austria are weakening the European Union through what the reputable opinionist Massimo Riva defines as "Chauvinistic nationalism that sometimes, without shame, evokes Nazi-Fascist nostalgia." In what is an "insidious threat" to today's unified Europe, those countries, in which democracy is new, are facing themselves off against the West European countries which have a longer and more solid democratic tradition.

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