As Italy Plunges Toward Elections, Others have their say

Judith Harris (February 21, 2018)



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ROME -- As the Scottish Robert Burns said, back in the late 18th Century, "O wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursels as ithers see us!" As Italy plunges toward national general elections March 4, the "giftie" are offering plenty of occasions for Italians to see themselves and those elections as others see them, with no holds barred. Herewith a sampling of the international press.

Among the most authoritative commentators is the London Economist [2] Feb. 17, whose two pages devoted to Italian elections were headlined "Star Man," a reference to Luigi Di Maio [3], who is "trying to turn the Five Star Movement (M5S) into a contender for power." Its pithiest comment: the official party line is that if, as latest polls show, the M5S emerges as Italy's biggest political force, but lacks the outright majority it needs to govern, it will still have to present its program and proposed cabinet to the other parties. "If they like what they see, they can offer their support. But that is disengenuous. It dodges the question of whether the M5S [4]will get its hands dirty, make concessions and trade ministerial portfolios." Should the M5S refuse that sort of offer, it risks

becoming "irrelevant."

The Washington Post [5] on Feb. 20 raised the question, "Can a party founded by a comedian run a major European country? Italy may soon find out." The comedian in question was, of course, Beppe Grillo [6], 69. "After nearly a decade of raging against the powerful, this Netizen band of rebels says it is ready to reign." [Netizen-- citzens on the net.] The party founded by Grillo (who has now backed away from it) "has long cherished its image as the ultimate renegade." But the mood of the country has shifted and so has the party. As a result, says the paper, these outsiders could soon be marching in. "The M5S is seeking to prove it can be a responsible party of government, not just one of protest." From the Moscow-owned Sputnik International [7], whose websites and radio broadcasts are managed by the Russian news agency Rossiya Segodnya, comes an interview with James Newell, political science professor at the University of Salford in the UK. Asked about the election prospects of the Lega, the right-leaning, anti-immigrant party headed by Matteo Salvini [8], Prof. Newell replied that Salvini's "polling figures are currently high, and he's part of a coalition with Silvio Berlusconi [9], [but] they're in disagreement as to who should become prime minister after the election. The electoral system is also a new one that was introduced last year, it's a combined proportional majority system and it's very uncertain what its effects will be." No editorial comment accompanied this extensive interview.

In its detailed analysis, Reuters News Agency [10] Feb. 20 opines that, although much of the past weeks of campaigning has focussed upon the issue of immigration, polls show that voters are most concerned about the economy, still not recovered from the 2008 financial crisis even as output across the 19-nation Eurozone as a whole has grown by 5% over the same decade. During that time the number of Italians at risk of poverty has risen by more than 3 million while youth unemployment in the south stands at 46.6%, 13 points above the level of 2008.

"This anaemic performance has pushed millions of Italians into poverty, stoking social discontent and fueling the rise of populist or anti-establishment parties, such as the far-right anti-immigrant League and the maverick 5-Star Movement [which] looks set to emerge as the largest party next month, and says it will introduce a universal wage for the poor if it wins power. Other parties are also promising to unleash billions of euros of fresh spending to revive the economy -- money analysts say the country does not have," says Reuters.

From the U.S. comes a lengthy article Feb. 9 by Rome-based reporter Elisabetta Povoledo [11] on candidate Emma Bonino [12], former EU commissioner. According to the New York Times headline, Bonino "won Italians' hearts -- but can she win their votes?" The general "aura of popularity around Ms. Bonino has not always translated into votes," says the Times. In past elections the parties with which she was identified (yesterday the late Marco Pannella's Radicals, today she heads Più Europa or More Europe) has fallen short of the minimum 3 percent required for a seat in Parliament. That, writes the New York Times, has prompted her current slogan, “Love Me Less, Vote Me More.” Recent polls indicate that 34% of Italians are hostile to the EU. Besides promoting the EU, Bonino has vowed to change Italian immigration laws.

For its world broadcasts in both radio and TV, the Rome Bureau [13] of the BBC [14] produced a lengthy broadcast Feb.18 entirely dedicated to former Premier Silvio Berlusconi. Acknowledging that due to a conviction for tax fraud Berlusconi cannot be premier or even a member of Parliament, the broadcast content was largely ignored by outsiders save for a moment after, when Berlusconi told reporter Sofia Bettiza,"If you shake a guy's hand that strongly, nobody will ever marry you." His (perhaps flirtatious) comment was picked up by the Italian press. Watch the video here >> [15]

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