

Tensions Among Partners Soar as EU Elections Approach

Judith Harris (May 15, 2019)



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With the approach of the European Union elections May 26, tensions soar between the government partners as each battles to snare votes from the other. Albeit those to be elected will be seated in the European Parliament, election day here is being seen as a purely Italian referendum between the parties of the so-called "yellow-green government."

This duopoly was formed just one year ago by the 5-Star Movement headed by Luigi Di Maio (the yellows) and by the Lega headed by Matteo Salvini (the greens). Each of these leaders, respectively Minister of Economic Development, Labor and Social Policies, and Minister of the Interior, or top cop, is deputy premier. Mediating between them (to the extent that he can) since May 23, 2018, is Premier Giuseppe Conte of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S).



The outcome of the May 26 election is obviously uncertain, but few here doubt that Deputy Premier Salvini will walk away with the largest chunk of the vote, besting, among others, Silvio Berlusconi. Traveling throughout Italy by costly government airplanes, a smiling Salvini campaigns at rallies taking selfies with his admirers, to the point that his opponents accuse him of not bothering to show up for work at the ministry he heads. This campaign style has been remarkably successful.

Born as the Lega Nord, under Salvini's management only since December 2014, the party spread throughout Italy, including to a limited extent Sicily. His 12 months in government have been remarkably successful; just one year ago, when that yellow-green government was formed, his party claimed only 17.4% of the national vote. By contrast, Di Maio's M5S won almost double, 33%. That situation has been reversed in the course of one year. Until a few weeks ago, most pollsters gave Salvini up to 35% of the vote and Di Maio, 22% at best.

Recent pre-election polls show Salvini's popularity shrinking by several percentage points, however. Armando Siri, senator representing the Lega and Undersecretary at the Ministry of Transport, has been a particularly close Salvini ally and until now his primary economic advisor. Accused among other things of corruption involving renewable energy and an alleged giant kickback, Siri was obliged to resign this month. Salvini initially fought to save Siri but eventually caved in, with Di Maio crowing, "On the morality question, [his remaining] would be self-destructive" for Salvini.

Salvini, only slightly weakened, still leads the pack. In particular, his anti-immigrant campaigns are popular. Fear of migrants continues to rise in Italy to the point that "this is the question of the century...a theme that divides politics and society in our country." Quoting an investigation conducted by the European Security Observatory two years ago, fear of migrants stood at 45%, the highest figure in a decade. Among the causes: the influx of migrants upon the Italian coasts and news reports of violence associated with migrants elsewhere in the EU.

Today, however, Frontex reports that by 2018 the illegal migration into EU countries had dropped by 25% and is now the lowest in the past five years, and about half of that of 2015. One million refugees flooded into Europe in 2015; by 2018 the figure had shrunk to 116,000, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Still, Salvini calls Mediterranean rescue ships "sea taxis," and has proposed a law that would impose a fine of \$4,000 - \$6,000 for each individual dragged out of the sea. Not everyone is enthusiastic about this: as economist Fabrizio Tonello of the University of Padua points out, this fine is relatively more than spies were given by the Nazis for each Jew denounced. "The SS paid 5,000 lire for every man to be deported to Auschwitz. Does drowning in the sea differ from being left to die in a concentration camp?" Prof. Tonello demands.

The anti-immigrant attitudes run counter to the teachings of Pope Francis. "Jesus, too, was a refugee," said the Pope on Jan. 16, 2019. On a visit to Bulgaria earlier this month he said, "Today the world of migrants and of refugees is humanity's cross to bear." Not surprisingly, Italian right-wingers criticize the Pope, and, according to the Rome daily *Il Tempo* last Jan. 18, "Conservatives and sovereignists accuse him of sponsoring uncontrolled immigration in the name of a vague good-feeling or even as a substitute for civilization."



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