

# Italy's second political earthquake

by Giorgio Malet

*"Inroads – The Canadian Journal of Opinion", vol. 41, 2017*

While many observers were shocked if not horrified by the election of Donald Trump, many Italians were feeling *déjà vu* at what they saw happening across the pond. The developments in Italian politics in the last two decades have tended to be disregarded by pundits, seeing the Italian experience as the product of idiosyncrasies of a rather peculiar country. However, time has shown that Italian flaws were not particularly idiosyncratic, as liberal democracy has come to face severe challenges in many Western countries. A trip through the past two decades of Italian political history could thus be most revealing as to what we may expect in other democracies that are today under stress.

During this period Italy experienced two major anti-élite uprisings. In both the 1994 and 2013 elections more people changed their vote than at any time in Italian history. These two electoral earthquakes resulted from a deep and widespread popular dissatisfaction with the political system and mainstream political actors. Both elections saw the sudden success of new political parties which transformed Italian politics. In 1994 the newly established *Forza Italia*, the party of the tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, won 21 per cent of the votes; in 2013 a quarter of Italian voters chose the Five Star Movement led by the former comedian Beppe Grillo, a record gain in Italian politics.

In 1994 the massive electoral realignment occurred in the wake of corruption scandals that ended up effectively destroying the party system of what is commonly called the 'First Republic' (1948-1993). That system amounted to the continuous domination of the same governing coalition. In 1992, spectacular revelations started to

emerge from investigations into almost every party represented in the Parliament. That was the straw that broke the camel's back, and fueled major structural changes in the party system. The result was the almost complete disappearance of most pre-1992 parties and their replacement by new political actors who were fundamentally different from their precursors in both identity and organization.

Among the new parties, *Forza Italia* deserves special attention, as Silvio Berlusconi quickly became the indispensable focus of Italian politics. The party system of the 'Second Republic' was unavoidably marked by a sharp and lasting conflict around the figure of the *Cavaliere*, as he is known and likes to be known. Although there is truth in the explanation of his enduring success being based on his control on the media and his effective use of political marketing, there is more to it. No one can have such a lasting impact on the political life of a country without a political message that corresponds to what voters want.

At its core, Berlusconi's ideology was a mix of populism and liberalism. He rejected the shared, traditional portrayal by Italian political elites of a backward country that had to be modernized: the Italian people were good as they were, with their vices and their virtues. Berlusconism built on the profound anti-communism of the 'First Republic,' putting an end to the cultural marginalization of the right in the era pre-1994. Although *Forza Italia* initially brought to Italy the neo-con ideology that had spread in the West in the 1980s, its leader gradually dismissed the economic liberalism of the early stages, and moved the party to a more traditional conservative stance. The broad appeal of this recipe allowed Berlusconi to govern the country for more than ten years between 1994 and 2011.

In June 2011, *the Economist* published a 14-page special report on Italy. The cover of the issue featured a picture of a proud Silvio Berlusconi with the title 'The man who screwed an entire country.' The report had a significant impact on public debate in Italy, as it was only in spring 2011 that Berlusconi had started to recognize publicly the dire situation of the Italian economy. A few months later, his inadequacy in dealing with the economic crisis led to pressures from the EU and international markets for

government change. The president of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, demanded Berlusconi's resignation, and asked the former EU-commissioner Mario Monti to form a cabinet of technocrats who would deal with the country's economic and financial emergency. With almost no opposition, or indeed serious discussion, in its first months of office the Monti Government pushed through two policy packages containing austerity and liberalization measures.

During 2012 the increasing unpopularity of the policies of the technocratic government increasingly undermined support from both the mainstream left (the Democratic Party) and the mainstream right (the People of Freedom, heir of *Forza Italia*). The credibility of the latter was largely undermined by the failures of the Berlusconi government. The right-wing electorate was unhappy with the increases in taxation and the pension reform introduced by the Monti government. The left faced the dilemmas typical of social-democratic parties in the post-industrial world, in particular, its pro-EU stance contrasting with its traditional position on worker protection. Moreover, in accepting the appointment of a technocratic executive rather than calling for new elections, the left made itself vulnerable to the accusation of weakness. In other words, neither the right nor the left seemed willing to take over the responsibility of solving the country's pressing economic and financial problems. These crisis years not only put into question the Italian mainstream parties' capacity to govern by the appointment of a technocratic executive; they led many to question the moral integrity of the Italian political elite. A large and growing number of journalistic publications raised these issues, and this, in turn, gave rise to popular indignation. It is only in this context that the astonishing success of the Five Star Movement can be understood.

The party founded by Beppe Grillo had its roots in the humus of the movements of the libertarian left. The five stars of the name represent the main pillars of its founding program: defence of the environment, public water service provision, zero-waste development, free Internet connectivity, and sustainable transportation. Along with these pillars is the emphasis on morality in public life, a central theme of Beppe Grillo's blog

since 2005. The “Clean Up Parliament” initiative and, later, the 2007 “V-Day” rallies (literally translatable as “Fuck-off Day”) are manifestations of this reality.

While these early experiences can be fit into the various expressions of anti-Berlusconi mobilisation promoted by left-wing, grassroots activists that emerged in 2001, over time Grillo’s relationship to the parties of the left evolved from collaboration to competition. Now dominant is an anti-elitist discourse, which refuses to distinguish between the left and the right, instead drawing a clear-cut line between the morality of ordinary people and the corruption of the elites - so much so that today no concept captures the essence of this party better than that of populism. Its populism can be categorized as pure, based on its approach to the Internet. For the Five-Star Movement, the Web is more than a means of communications and organization, it is a key element in its conception of politics and democracy. The exaltation of direct democracy, in its digital version, is the concrete expression of its conception of politicians as delegates constrained by an ‘imperative mandate’ from the people. However, the leader often disavows its democratic principles in practice, imposing a three-line whip upon his MPs on controversial policy issues or intervening in the candidate selection process.

Yet, the populism of the Five Star Movement has not been the sole challenge to Italian liberal democracy. The weakening position of Silvio Berlusconi, whose party still won more than a fifth of the votes in 2013, has, since then, favoured another party: the Northern League. Led by a newly elected leader, Matteo Salvini, the party’s poll ratings are currently around 13 per cent nationally, despite having long been active only in the Northern part of the country.

The political and electoral history of the Northern League, the oldest party currently represented in the Italian Parliament, has known ups and downs, from the semi-clandestine early stages marked by ethnic regionalism to the national prominence of the controversial figure of Umberto Bossi, whose shifting personal popularity has been reflected in the party’s wavering support. It has always been hard to place the Northern League in any party family. The regional nature of the party has undergone significant changes during the phases of government and opposition, but what remains consistent

for both the grassroots and in its election campaigns is the stress on regional identity, of the periphery versus the centre.

Nevertheless, in every other way, populism for the Northern League is like a second skin, in its aversion to politicians and intellectuals, its desire to return to community traditions, to look to charismatic personalities, to common sense, to the language “spoken by the people”. Although observers have been reluctant to include the Northern League in the radical right party family, the features placing it there became increasingly obvious over time, especially in its position on immigration, security and public order, and, after Italy entered the Eurozone, hostility to the EU. Like other such parties the Northern League has been the target of Putin’s influence. Although the party has contacts with Russia since the 1990s, under the new leadership of Matteo Salvini it has signed an official agreement of collaboration with United Russia, Putin’s party. The economic impact EU-imposed Russian sanctions have had on some Northern firms can be in part an explanation of this strategy. However, Salvini’s role as mouthpiece of Russian propaganda suggests there is something more, something scarier, in that agreement. Furthermore, the party platform has recently shifted in an attempt to extend its political activity to the rest of the peninsula, a strategy that, even if unlikely to succeed, has enabled its leader to present himself as leader of a national alternative to the center-left government of Matteo Renzi.

Appointed Prime Minister in February 2014, the young and ambitious leader of the Democratic Party’ honeymoon with Italian voters became rocky when his labour market reform alienated many former leftist supporters, and came to an end in late 2016 with the rejection by referendum of a constitutional reform he had strongly advocated. The reform would have overcome the bicameral arrangement of the Italian parliamentary system by reducing the Senate’s powers both over the formation of governments and in the legislative process. However, the outcome of the referendum was mainly driven by widespread dissatisfaction with the government, especially in Southern Italy, where the economy has not yet recovered from the crisis. Following Renzi’s resignation, the Foreign Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, became prime minister, leaving

the composition of the cabinet almost unaffected, and leaving Renzi with significant influence over government decisions. After his likely easy win over his internal rivals in the upcoming primary elections, he plans to present himself as a fresh candidate in the next general election, slated for 2018. As we can see in figure 1, the outcome is less than certain.

In this context, as we can see in the chart, the two challengers described above have consolidated their position in the party system and gained further popularity. It is hard to tell in which direction they will push Italian politics as it is still unclear under which electoral law Italian voters will make their choices next year. The current proportional system – which resulted from a decision by the Constitutional Court which abolished the majoritarian bonus provided for by the previous law – has started to display its first effects in the increasing fragmentation of the party system.

On the left, the Democratic Party has recently suffered a split from two influential party leaders to form a new party in addition to the four or five already existing. However, they might eventually end up merging in a single list for the next election if they manage to overcome the traditional divisiveness of the Italian left. On the right, the rise of the Northern League has challenged the central role of Forza Italia as coalition builder. The radical right positions of Matteo Salvini seem irreconcilable with the moderate stances of the centrist parties once allied with Berlusconi. Furthermore, the uncertain future of Forza Italia is still tied to the destiny of its 80-year-old leader.

The current challenge to liberal-democracy is, in the end, a challenge to mainstream politics and, in many respects, a reaction to the failures of established parties. The domestic consequences of globalization – in terms of economic competition, supranational integration and cultural diversity – have given rise to new political conflicts which, in turn, have uprooted the traditional reference points of ‘left’ and ‘right’. The failure of mainstream parties to give voice to these new grievances and to propose and deliver practical solutions to these challenges have fuelled a vehement popular reaction. The economic crisis, thus, has only intensified a deeper political crisis which has been a long time coming.

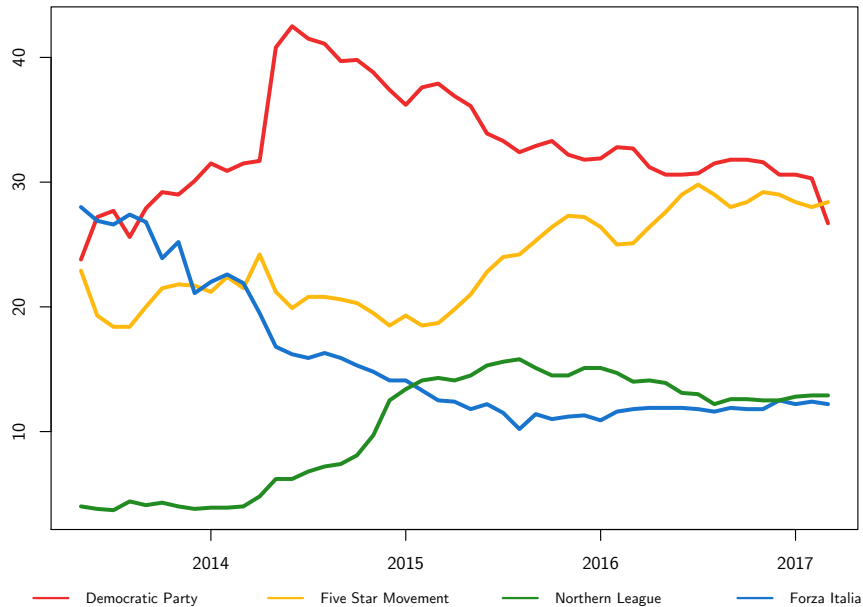
Seen from outside, the Italian experience is certainly not encouraging. Italy has shown that democracies do not often learn from their mistakes. The politics of overpromising nourishes easy hopes and triggers strong disappointments. Populism can end up feeding more populism. If Italy manages to muddle through again, this time it must figure out a way to break out of this trap. The prospects are rather bleak.

**Table 1.** *Election results in 2013*

	Votes (%)	Seats (%)
<i>Left-wing coalition</i>		
Democratic Party (PD)	25.5	47.1
Left Ecology and Freedom (SEL)	3.2	5.9
Democratic Center (CD)	0.5	1.0
<i>Right-wing coalition</i>		
People of Freedom (PdL)*	21.4	15.6
Northern League (LN)	4.0	2.9
Brothers of Italy (FdI)	1.9	1.4
<i>Centrist coalition</i>		
Civic Choice (SC)	8.6	6.2
Center Union (UdC)	1.7	1.3
<i>Challenger</i>		
Five Star Movement (M5S)	25.1	17.3

Note: The table reports the vote and seat share for the Chamber of Deputies. Only parties that obtained at least one percent of the seats are included. Source: [www.politicaldatayearbook.com](http://www.politicaldatayearbook.com).

\* Now again Forza Italia, after the split of a centrist faction who entered the governing coalition.

**Figure 1.** *Opinion polling of main Italian parties since the last election*

Note: The figure shows monthly averages.

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