

Political Italy on the Brink

Judith Harris (September 28, 2013)



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torpedoing of the government installed after fundamentally inconclusive national general elections held only last Spring. The first consequence is that a vote of confidence is expected to take place early this week. If he is voted down, the Letta government will resign.

Premier Letta response was swift and blunt. At the end of a meeting late Friday night with his Council of Ministers he declared that, "We need the harshest and clearest possible confrontation. I am not available to go forward without clarification. An efficacious government action is obviously incompatible with the resignation in bloc of the members of a parliamentary group [PdL] which supposedly upholds the executive. Either the [government] is relaunched, so that the nation and its citizens' interests come first, or this experience comes to an end.... I have no intention to just get by or to lend myself to continuous threats and blackmail." The immediate consequence was to halt the crucial vote on the budget.

Among a newly angry Berlusconi's targets for invective is President Giorgio Napolitano, who until now had been treated by Berlusconi himself as an impartial leader of the nation. Following the three-way election split just five months ago Berlusconi himself had asked Napolitano to remain in office for a second seven-year term in order to guarantee the stability necessary for dealing with its economic crisis and to meet the criteria established by the European Union.

At the same time Premier Letta, fresh from a visit to the U.S., is himself under scathing attack, first by Berlusconi himself, but also by the PD's own angry leftists. This faction has long lobbied for a confrontation with Berlusconi. They too have long promoted new elections and criticized Letta for remaining in government with Berlusconi following the former Premier's conviction in August by the Italian supreme court, the Cassations, for tax fraud on the grand scale. The resignations Friday give this faction renewed political energy and justification. At the same time the PD is under relentless daily attack by the Five-Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, M5S), led by Beppe Grillo, whose reaction was, "Let's vote!"

Officially the quarrel between the governing partners this past week has been over a planned increase in the sales tax (VAT) from 21% to 22%. "We won't be accomplices to raising taxes," said one PdL spokesman. But no one is fooled. What prompted the decision by Berlusconi and his ministers to go to the mattresses is the meeting to take place on October 4, when the Senate commission, in which the left prevails will, vote on stripping him of his parliamentary status. Berlusconi has the option of resigning beforehand or of accepting either a year of house arrest or to submit to a social welfare program for convicted criminals.

For President Napolitano, the PdL decision to have its ministers resign was "improvised and disturbing for the institutions." As for Letta, he remains at least publicly optimistic, and the veteran political observer Massimo Franco hypothesizes that a small space for mediation may still exist, "if for no other reason than [Berlusconi's] fear of a government being created that could be far more hostile to him than the present one." In fact, before new elections can be called President Napolitano is far more likely to urge creation of another round under Letta. This could happen, in theory; defections from the right, including from Berlusconi's own PdL, and from the left, including from Grillo ranks, are within the range of the possible.

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