

When the white smoke from Italy's chimney?

Judith Harris (March 13, 2013)



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ROME - Workaday Milan, Italy's financial capital, was thrown into a small tizzy Wednesday morning when a hundred or so mostly middle-aged men and women blocked the sidewalk in front of the city courthouse and began to sing the Italian national anthem, "Fratelli d'Italia." All were MPs and senators of former Premier Silvio Berlusconi's Freedom Party (PdL), and they were protesting what they consider the magistrates' cruel and undemocratic persecution of the leader of their party, third largest in Italy.

Prompting their protest was Berlusconi's indisposition when called to testify in the so-



called "Rubygate" trial, in which he is accused of having obstructed justice and of having sex with a minor. Through his lawyers he had informed the court that he could not testify because hospitalized with severe uveitis, an eye infection. While many Italians amused themselves with hackneyed off-color jokes about the cause of eye problems, the prosecutors were not laughing because they suspected that he was playing judicial dodgems. As the leftist media cried foul play in favor of the judges, Berlusconi's party supporters staged their demonstration. At that point, an editorialist from the daily La Repubblica, Ezio Mauro, deemed it a disgusting "riot" (gazzara) that caused grave disturbance in the city, adding that it was wrong to demonstrate against the judiciary in any case.

The response from the pro-Berlusconi forces was more cries of persecution. A scathing retort to Ezio Mauro came from Vittorio Feltri, 69, editor-in-chief of the rightist daily Il Giornale. "Every day here in Milan we have demonstrators blocking streets, schools, highways, railway lines, with traffic paralyzed, cars turned over. If Ezio Mauro, who was in Rome, had actually seen this, he would have been a bit more calm. Most of the MPs demonstrating were women, nicely dressed, and well behaved. They actually looked embarrassed, and when they sang our national anthem, they were so tuneless, poor things, they couldn't have performed even at San Remo. They were as out of place in music as [Premier] Mario Monti is in Palazzo Chigi [the Italian White House]."

Again prosecutors were not amused and dispatched court-appointed doctors to the clinic to verify Berlusconi's alibi. From Berlusconi's supporters came shrieks of protest, that the judges are misusing their power and are simply trying to eliminate Berlusconi from the political scene, using the courts unjustly. But in the end, this became a boomerang, for the doctors referred back to the court that, yes, not only does Berlusconi have uveitis, which causes sensitivity to light, but that he also has heart problems severe enough to warrant keeping him in a hospital bed for several more days.

At this point President Giorgio Napolitano entered the fray in an attempt to maintain national and judicial order, honor and dignity. It is, he said, an "aberration" to say that the judiciary are attempting to remove Berlusconi from politics. But at the same time, he said in essence, politicians should be allowed to conduct their business undisturbed. "By virtue of their mandate, received from the people," no one can be excluded. A politician's right to participate adequately in the political process, in this delicate phase, should be "guaranteed," Napolitano went on to say, in what amounts to a rap on the judiciary knuckles."

We appreciate his position," said a grateful PdL spokesman. But not everyone was pleased. Napolitano's words struck many as a way out of the endless legal woes confronting Berlusconi. Among the protesters was Napolitano's personal friend and customarily strong supporter, Eugenio Scalfari, Ezio Mauro's boss and editor-in-chief of La Repubblica.

In a larger sense, such travails characterize this, the most difficult political crisis in post-war Italy, and illustrate its complexity. The problem is that no clear way ahead is yet visible. As an American wrote me yesterday, "When will we see the white smoke from Italy's chimney?" There are a few deadlines. On Friday, the newly elected Parliamentarians and Senators will be seated and begin to elect the presidents of the respective bodies and chair persons of committees. This will take perhaps a week. Then, on April 15, President Napolitano will lose his presidential powers. In the intervening weeks, will a new government be chosen?

The difficulties are enormous. The four main groups remain at loggerheads. Beppe Grillo - who rules over the strongest single party in Parliament - continues absolutely to reject advances from the second largest party, the Partito Democratico of Pierluigi Bersani. Bersani in turn firmly rejects any hypothesis of making a governing deal with Berlusconi's Liberty party, third in size.

How long can Bersani continue to court Grillo? Probably not for long. Grillo has a host of irritating



positions behind him, such as insinuating in 2001 that the late Rita Levi Montalcini's Nobel Prize was basically bought for her by a pharmaceutical company. He also called the revered scientist "an old whore" (vecchia puttana) and in the end paid a fine for defamation. More recently he called gay political leader Nichi Vendola a "supercazzola (see Wikipedia for translation). Grillo makes anti-Semitic remarks. He opposes giving citizenship to children born in Italy to immigrant parents. He suggested that, when Carabinieri beat up a Moroccan, they do so in private and out of sight of a camera. Yesterday he announced, irresponsibly and incorrectly, that Italy has already left the Euro.

All this makes it extremely difficult for Bersani to continue to make cordial advances to Grillo for cooperation in the national interest. Without a miracle, another round of elections cannot be ruled out.

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