

Divorce, Italian political style

Judith Harris (August 01, 2010)



Prime Minister Berlusconi ousts Gianfranco Fini, Speaker of the House, from the "Party of Liberty", which the two co-founded only two years ago. The chaotic breakup of the party has the Italian political class reeling, with no one certain of what is to come. Whether or not new elections are called in coming months, the likelihood that Berlusconi will become president of Italy, succeeding Napolitano, seems sorely reduced. For the country, this signals a failure of that biparty system which many hoped would replace the unstable coalitions that have characterized Italy for decades.

Can media magnate Silvio Berlusconi survive his second acrimonious divorce in a year? Last summer his wife Veronica filed for divorce after publishing a flamboyant letter in which she charged the Premier with fooling around with young girls and of suffering from an unnamed illness. This week an



irate Berlusconi seized the initiative, ousting his recalcitrant partner Gianfranco Fini from the political party, the "Partito della Libertà" (Party of Liberty, or PdL), which the two co-founded only two years ago. With that split, what Berlusconi has also been calling the "Partito dell'Amore" (Party of Love) has just foundered, becoming instead the party of rancor.

The chaotic breakup of the party which triumphed at elections only 27 months ago has the Italian political class reeling, with no one certain of what is to come. Not least, Berlusconi has called on Fini to resign as president of the Chamber of Deputies (Speaker of the House) on grounds that in that office Fini represents the PdL party. Replying that his post, the third highest office in Italy, is institutional and not political, Fini refuses flatly to quit.

Party meetings are going on long into the night as the leaders debate the other big issues: whether it is in Berlusconi's interest to demand early elections next spring (or perhaps as early as November); whether a babysitter government of technicians would be a wise move; what clout Fini will have with voters now that he is on his own; what position President Giorgio Napolitano will take; how many deputies Berlusconi can poach from other groups; or if life in Palazzo Chigi (the Italian White House) can be made to slog along as usual until the extent of the damage to both Berlusconi and Fini can be measured.

Nevertheless there are a few fixed points. This definitive breach with Fini after a year of alienation shows that Silvio Berlusconi is unable to impose upon the country his project to remain in power for at least an entire five-year legislature, if not more. Romano Prodi's left-leaning legislature lasted two years before being swept aside by Berlusconi's zealous new party, which however is similarly crashing after only two years.

It is striking that, despite Berlusconi's charisma with his peers and with the voters, this is his third time at bat with governing partners and the third time he has struck out. The first time he quarreled with his partner from the separatist Northern League, Umberto Bossi; the second time he was in government the fracture was with the Catholic politician Pier Ferdinando Casini; and now, with Fini, formerly of the rightist Alleanza Nazionale.

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Fini promises to respect the voters' wishes, but Berlusconi's kicking Fini out of the government could make the passage of future legislation difficult unless Fini agrees with whatever law is proposed. At present the new Fini group, to be known as "Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia" (Future and Freedom for Italy), has 33 members of Parliament out of 630. Although a small group, this is troubling for Berlusconi, whose PdL has 238 deputies and Bossi's Lega, 59. The government's parliamentary majority is thus reduced to 297, whereas the 316 necessary for a majority vote. In the Senate, with 322 senators, a majority of 161 is required; the center-right (Berlusconi plus Bossi) has 163, and the Fini group, 10.

For the country, this signals a failure of that two-party system which many of us had hoped would replace the unstable coalitions that have characterized Italy for decades.

So what happened? It seems to be the cumulative effect of scandal upon scandal. Last summer's sex scandal involving various call girls evolved gradually into revelations of political connections with Mafia bosses, even as the government took credit for arresting Mafia foot soldiers. When phone taps showing corruption were leaked, the government tried to push through a press gag law and began



promoting changes to the Italian Constitution, which Fini opposed. But one after another government figures—members of cabinet among them—were forced to resign as shocking evidence of the manipulation of state contracts to government cronies emerged, including in quake-stricken L'Aquila. At that point, even the customarily tolerant Italian man in the street (less the women, quicker to take umbrage) began reacting against an unacceptable level of the “culture of corruption,” as it is suddenly being called here. And this may be the most important element in le divorce: that Italians of all parties and religious views and walks of life are reacting with shock and disdain at such shenanigans, which are certainly not limited to the Berlusconi crowd.

It's not only about the economy, stupid.

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