

Projections for an Edgy Election

Judith Harris (January 19, 2013)



With national general elections plus elections in three key regions less than five weeks away, the campaign has turned more agitated than any in recent history. Behind the obvious nervous tension is the fact that for the past decade of elections to Parliament and the Senate the country was effectively divided into two camps, and the political battle was limited to center right and center left vying for control over the moderate center. By contrast, this campaign, as veteran commentator Sergio Romano points out in the daily *Corriere della Sera*, has no certainties. "It's a free-for-all, with everybody against everybody else," says Romano.

ROME - The unknowns far outweigh the certainties. The organized political spectrum is



extraordinarily fragmented, with seventeen or so official parties, plus dozens of other wannabes too small to be counted, vying for votes. Even within the small official parties new splinter groups erupt. A rift is taking place even within the much diminished Radical party, whose historical leaders are at odds over support of a rightist candidate, Francesco Storace, who is backed by Marco Pannella but opposed by Emma Bonino.

The largest single party in the fray remains the Partito Democratico (PD). Its popularity has slipped slightly, but the pollsters still give the PD over one-third of the vote, according to the respectable survey company IPSOS on Jan. 16. Translated into parliamentary seats, the PD can expect to obtain 294 MPs. Nevertheless, the bloc composed of the 40% who continue to say they are undecided remains larger still. Once in front of the ballot box, will these voters make a choice, and if so, what choice? Together with the others who say they will abstain or turn in blank ballots, these unknowns amount to almost half the electorate.

Among the other causes for an edgy political campaign is the popularity of Beppe Grillo, whom IPSOS gives over 12% of the vote. Then there is the possible effect of a spanking new political formation run by magistrate Antonio Ingroia, controversial former prosecutor in Palermo running on his own ticket, Rivoluzione Civile, whom the polls already give almost 5% - votes which otherwise would have gone to Bersani's PD. Alert to the threat, Bersani's response was to enroll into the PD ranks of candidates Pietro Grasso, the respected magistrate who has served since 2005 as head of the Anti-Mafia Commission of the High Council of Magistrates. Word is already around that Grasso is Pierluigi Bersani's candidate for Justice Minister if the PD is in charge of the future government.

It was supposedly a step forward when PD leader Bersani and outgoing Premier Mario Monti met Wednesday to forge a non-belligerence pact. Although Bersani has resolutely denied that any such pact existed, or that the two even met, the news immediately circulated that they had agreed to cooperate with each other, or at least to stop attacking each other, with an eye to defeating Silvio Berlusconi's Partito della Libertà' (PdL). Predictions are that Monti's new party, Con Monti per l'Italia (With Monti for Italy), will win 10.9% of the vote. If Monti joins forces with the PD, the two would command a healthy 43.8% in the 630-seat Parliament. Nikki Vendola's Sinistra Ecologia Libertà' (Left Ecology Freedom, or SEL), today quoted at 4.7% of the vote for perhaps 41 seats.

But can these three make common cause? This ménage à trois does not seem easy at first blush, either to form a coalition or to attempt to govern in tandem. Bersani is already solidly allied with Vendola, who is openly gay and decidedly left leaning. By contrast, Monti has the open backing of both the Vatican, whose views he can hardly ignore, and some support from big business as well as the Euromanagers. Most importantly, Monti is certain to deliver more votes than is Vendola on the left. Bersani has been showing his frustration by thundering against what he calls overly personalized political formations. But when push comes to shove, can he coax Monti and Vendola, with their extremely diverse ideologies and voting bases, to join forces with the PD so as to boost their votes into a solid winning coalition? It is not impossible; Vendola has begun to make soothing noises about cooperating with Bersani over any future agreement with Monti. In theory, it may not even be necessary to do so because the Porcellum or Hog Law of election rules would give a Bersani-Vendola coalition a premium in Parliament. But would Bersani want to govern without Monti?

Among the possible candidates for premier, Bersani is for the moment the most popular, with 31% preferring him. Monti is second, with 17%. Silvio Berlusconi is simply ignored as a candidate in favor of his second-in-command, Angelino Alfano, with 10% of the still hypothetical vote, in a tie with Beppe Grillo. Berlusconi's PdL, with 18% of the vote, would have perhaps 91 MPs. His party's on-and-off but just now loyal supporter, the Northern League headed by Roberto Maroni, is expected to win 4.8% of the vote (for 23 MPs). This would give the conservative bloc in the Chamber at least 114 MPs--more, when support from splinter right groups is included.

Nevertheless, although the PD seems therefore far ahead, Bersani is said to fear that, by entering politics with his own personal party, Monti is inadvertently helping the duo of conservative parties led by Berlusconi and by Roberto Maroni of the Northern League to gain control of Lombardy, an important factor since regional strength feeds into the Senate vote; if the PD together with the Northern League win control of the Senate, they can stalemata legislation, just as the Republican party in the U.S. House of Representatives challenges President Obama.



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