

Coming Down to Rome, Salvini Goes Up in the Polls

Judith Harris (March 03, 2015)



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In EMG Acqua poll results announced March 2, Salvini's party showed the most dynamism of any, surging upward in one week by 0.8%, to almost 16%. In Italy's fragmented political picture, the Lega Nord now stands as the third most popular party in Italy. It is still well behind Premier Matteo Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD), with 37.1%, and Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), with 19.6%, but both of these showed small but telling losses of respectively 0.1% and 0.5%. The encouraging note: almost 40% abstained, or at least refused to say for whom they would vote.

At the same time Salvini is an extremely popular political leader, behind President Sergio Mattarella (who is the most popular single political figure in Italy) and Renzi, but well ahead of both Beppe Grillo and Berlusconi. The Salvini version of an enlarged Lega Nord thoroughly bested former Premier Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI), which slumped from 12.4% to 12% in just one week; last November polls gave FI over 16%. The sense is that Berlusconi's splintering party is in deep trouble. Berlusconi had had two possibilities to remain in the picture: his notorious alliance with Renzi for reforms (the so-called Nazareno Pact) and his much discussed mending of the breach with his former partner Angelino Alfano, who is in the government coalition with Renzi. Neither has worked out, and Alfano is making it clear that he and his right-leaning party Nuovo Centrodestra (NCD) intend to stay the course with Renzi. This leaves Berlusconi - still in trouble with the law over the Ruby Heart-stealer case of sex with minors - enough out on a limb that he is reportedly leaning toward making some form of a deal with, guess who, Salvini.

This is an interesting concept, for the two have a great deal in common. As the prestigious commentator Corrado Augias has pointed out, Salvini's gift, akin to that of Berlusconi (he is now 79 or so), is a TV presence. Like Berlusconi, says Augias, the TV Salvini gets rid of complex issues by ignoring them, tucking them instead into an easily digestible, "elementary and unreal" formula. As an example, Augias cites a debate back in 1994 between left leader Achille Occhetto and Berlusconi, when the former tried to analyze a complex situation which Berlusconi brushed off with a few clever if not particularly pertinent words. However, Augias goes on to say, a speech in public is quite another thing from a sound bite, and in his opinion Salvini more or less blew it on Saturday, when he spoke at a huge rally in Rome's Piazza del Popolo, which attracted up to 50,000 cheering supporters. He is as wily as TV hip, incidentally; back in June of 2012 he said that he disliked going on TV, "I don't care about it, I go only because the Lega of Umberto Bossi is worth it. He will go down in history as a genius, thanks to him for bringing us here. Long live free Padania."

On the eve of the rally Feb. 28 an anti-Salvini crowd fought a pitched battle with police, but the rally itself went off without incident unless you count a few eccentric banners, like the one with a photo of Mussolini, saying, "Salvini, ti aspettavo" (Salvini, I've been waiting for you). In his speech Salvini asked for more gun rights for householders: "We'll change the law [limiting] legitimate defense: you set foot in my house, you better know you exit flat on the ground." (He carefully did not say "dead.") Salvini has a liking for the rough-tough language of populism: "Why is that every time I say the name 'Renzi' you shout go screw yourself? Then people get offended and invent the vaffanculo tax: 3% plus VAT." Salvini used that same phrase to insult former Minister Elsa Fornero, author of a controversial labor reform law in 2012. (See: <http://ricciutilaw.com/an-introduction-to-the-fornero-labour-reform>)

After down with Renzi, his key slogans are down the European Union ("Renzi is a servant of the EU") and down with immigrants. This is a favorite theme, but not his only one, and there was something for everyone: "The foremost thief in Italy is called the State," he told the cheering crowd in Rome. Back in Pontida in Northern Italy on June 13, 2009 - more than three years before he would take charge of the Northern League -he had come down hard on Neapolitans: "Can't you smell them coming, even the dogs are running away: the Neapolitans are arriving! O bearers of cholera, quake victims, you've never washed yourselves with soap." Now that Salvini is trying to boost himself into an alternative to Renzi, he does not go quite so far. Addressing the Coast Guard commanders whose boats are helping to rescue migrants, Salvini said, "Send the immigrants back home, we've had enough of their arriving." You did not sign up to the Navy to help out the guys running the illegal boats, he concluded. A for the Roma (Gypsies), "You want a house, go buy yourself one - quit living off the Italians."



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