

10 June 2013

## Italy's Political Crisis

Italy's most recent elections left the impression that it is a politically divided and seemingly ungovernable country. That may seem like a familiar tale, argues Roberto Mastroianni, but the election results actually reflect a 20-year transformation in Italian politics and a new capacity to export instability.

By Roberto Mastroianni for ISN

---

*Editor's Note: One familiar adage about the "European Project" is that it occurs in spurts and usually benefits from a crisis. Indeed, crises have historically acted both as catalysts and as justifications for next-step levels of European integration. However, what has made the post-2007 financial, sovereign debt and Eurozone crises so disorienting is that the old pattern hasn't held true, or at least not completely. The great integration project has progressed, but in a truly fractured, episodic, one step forward and two steps back sort of way. The manifestations of this ambivalence towards further unity are also there for anyone to see - resurgent nationalism in Germany, restive populism in places such as Hungary, heightened anti-EU feelings in Switzerland and, yes, continued political fragmentation in Italy. Today, Turin-based political activist and analyst Roberto Mastroianni reminds us that Italy's current political impasse was a long time in the making.*

The Italian elections that took place on 24-25 February 2013 ended up presenting a 'rough nation' to the international community - i.e., a nation that was divided, seemingly ungovernable, and a potential source of economic financial and geopolitical instability. This dubious picture, it should be noted, has deep roots. It is the result of a political and institutional crisis that has affected Italy for 20 years now and that recently manifested itself in a political landscape dominated by a populist right, led by Silvio Berlusconi; a center-right technocratic faction, led by Mario Monti; a center-left social-democratic grouping, led by Pierluigi Bersani; and a grassroots populist movement that spreads across the political spectrum, headed by Beppe Grillo. When these five groups collided together in the February election, the results spoke for themselves. The next Italian parliament would not be able to represent the various interests of Italian society, let alone stabilize or even reform Italian politics. What the results further ensured, at least for the foreseeable future, is that Italy will produce and export economic and political instability in Europe. Yes, the type of instability that threatens the region's democratic institutions and therefore its security.

### **The First Systemic Crisis**

Italy's political troubles are not recent. They have their roots in the systemic meltdown of the early 1990s, a period usually known as *tangentopoli* (sometimes translated as "bribesville"). As a result of

the *Mani Pulite* ("Clean Hands") investigations also pursued at the time (1992-1996), a sizeable part of the Italian ruling class was tarnished by its long-term complicity in a system that wove organized crime, politics and the economy together. In the case of Italian politicians, however, the judicially-driven housecleaning became a purge. To the reform-minded, the latter represented a long-awaited blow against corruption, but politics is almost never a simple morality play. Ousting corrupt politicians may have served a public good, but it also removed a 'social glue' that kept populist sentiments in check, and that preserved the unity of the Italian State.

Political unity was possible in post-1945 Italy because of 'governments of national unity'. They alone created the political space needed by different socio-economic interests to participate in government; to then fit their agendas within a Western geopolitical framework; and to democratize and industrialize a country unavoidably caught up in tense Cold War dynamics. One could, and should, applaud such political nimbleness, but there was an obvious flaw in Italy's political fabric - pre-*tangentopoli* unity governments relied on rhetorical sleights of hand to succeed. The various political interests that participated in them used political rhetoric both to overlap and yet obfuscate the interests of others. It was a form of verbal gymnastics, in other words, that permitted Italy's main political parties to mediate between themselves, to control left- and right-wing populist forces, and to create the appearance of unity if not its substance.

Beneath the unifying rhetoric, however, Italy actually remained a politically tense society. Its social, ideological and economic divisions persisted. Strong extreme-right and extreme-left political movements persisted. And smaller parties such as the liberals, republicans, and socialists could not be dismissed by the larger ones - they had precious political expertise that no mainstream government could ignore indefinitely.

### **The 'infinite transition'**

The arrival of the *tangentopoli* period spelled the death knell of national unity governments as Italy's preferred way to maintain its political coherence. Indeed, it ushered in a game-changing realignment of its political landscape. The catholic center, which had made up the core of every post-1945 Italian government's majority, disappeared and then recomposed itself. The Italian industrial and financial elites, who lost their traditional political representation, made a pact with the successors of the Italian Communist and Christian Democracy Parties, which then birthed later "technocratic" governments led by Giuliano Amato, Carlo Azelio Ciampi, Lamberto Dini, and most recently Romano Prodi. In turn, the most conservative and populist part of the Italian north then threw its weight behind Silvio Berlusconi and the right wing and secessionist-minded *Lega Nord* (Northern League). Berlusconi in due time then legitimized the former fascist party (the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*) and contained the secessionist agenda of the xenophobic *Lega Nord*. And so it went.

What should one make of the fluid post-*tangentopoli* period, which has lasted for 20 years now and of which the above realignments are but a small sample? Well, it is safe to say that it has been a period of 'infinite transition' that led to a second major crisis, as we shall now see.

### **From *Tangentopoli* to the second systemic crisis - the rise of two hostile populisms**

In the wake of the political housecleaning of the early 1990s, Italy's financial elites joined forces with the left wing of the Christian Democracy Party and the successor of the Italian Communist Party to install a series of center-left governments that tried to implement genuine institutional and political reforms. To their credit, they brought Italy into the euro-zone, reduced the public debt, and embraced a truly western geopolitical orientation. But in the end, these governments failed for two overriding reasons.

First, there was the growing Berlusconi phenomenon. By embodying and promoting a euro-skeptical, authoritarian and xenophobic brand of populism, and then melding it with a pursuit and defense of his own personal interests, Berlusconi was no parent of progress. But as just noted, he represented a phenomenon and not just an individual problem.

What he did was to use his economic and media power to consolidate an ethical system (!) that both legitimized and reinforced a growing populism in Italian society. As a result, everyday Italians polarized into two mutually hostile camps. The rightist populists now saw political parties as something useless. They enthusiastically worshiped at the altar of the "self-made man". They were, as already noted, xenophobic and euro-skeptical. Finally, they believed that government had limited claims on the individual, which then enabled them to question – not so implicitly, one might add – the rule of law, particularly in relation to personal corruption and tax evasion.

To blunt this form of populism there arose another one – a leftist variety that merged with the liberal opposition and a number of anti-establishment extreme-left movements. This kludging together did not serve Romano Prodi well. As Berlusconi's most prominent political foil during the 'infinite transition', Prodi spent most of his political capital trying to convince the leftist populists that they should stop being near-permanent anti-establishment outsiders and actually contemplate the idea of regaining political power through elections.

So, problem number one in the post-*tangentopoli* era was the bifurcation of Italian political culture into two hostile populist camps. The second and related problem is one we've already talked about. Because these forms of populism were ethical systems as much as they were political orientations, there was ultimately no common political space available to reintroduce the historical solution of choice – a national unity government that, as previously stated, used political rhetoric to both overlap and yet obfuscate the interests of others; that permitted Italy's main political parties to mediate between themselves; that permitted a once-intact political class to control left- and right-wing extremist forces; and that permitted Italy's political parties to create the appearance of unity if not its deeper substance.

When you have the above problems and then throw in the mid- to late-2000's problems of Berlusconi's increasingly tattered credibility, both at home and abroad, and the arrival, in quick succession, of the financial, sovereign debt and Eurozone crises, you then arrive at a second system-level crisis in Italy – one that originated with the invitation to Mario Monti to form a technocratic government in November 2011.

Monti's government, unfortunately, did not manage to stabilize the country politically. If anything, what occurred was a repeat of the musical chairs we described earlier in this article. The government's rise to power, for example, heralded the breakdown of the alliance between the financial-industrial elites and the center-left. At the same time, the catholic center and liberal-conservatives, along with the economic interests they traditionally represent, tried to build a new center-right grouping around Monti. The idea was to aggregate together parts of the center-left, Berlusconi's coalition, and the liberal-catholic center in order to build an electoral consensus that would then form a coalition government with the traditional center-left. Did this strategy work? No – it miscalculated Berlusconi's remaining economic and media power; it underestimated the economically hard-hit middle-class' willingness to lodge a massive protest vote on behalf of Beppe Grillo's populist *Movimento 5 Stelle* (5 Stars Movement); and it did not account for the enduring strength of the Two Populisms we discussed earlier. As a result, the Monti strategy did not pan out and Italy lapsed into a second crisis.

**Where we stand now**

The present coalition government of Enrico Letta, which is the first one in the history of the Italian Republic to include representatives of all the major candidate-coalitions that competed in the general election, may seem like one of the grand coalitions of the past, but that is not the case. It is, as one critic has it, an unstable “odd couple coalition” made up of too many recycled politicians. The ‘infinite transition’ continues, and the dominant populisms shaping the country have not disintegrated. The only true solution for today’s Italy is to reestablish the traditional alliance between the Catholics, the Liberals and the Left. They are the most likely to stabilize the country’s political system, as they did during the past 20 years, and to open a new era of political and socio-economic reforms that could appease a country still full of tensions. Without the latter reforms, one might add, Italy’s instability will not just be for domestic consumption.

[A note from the ISN’s Peter Faber: Please note that any errors of commission or omission in the coda to this article are my responsibility alone, as are any translation errors before then.]

---

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Italy: Stuck Between the Necessity for Reform and Political Deadlock](#)

[Southern Europe in Trouble](#)

[The Image of Crisis-Ridden Europe and the Division Between Creditor and Debtor Countries](#)

[The Gloomy Scenario of Italy's Default](#)

[What is holding Italy back?](#)

---

For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's featured [dossiers](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

---

## **Publisher**

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

---

Creative Commons - Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported

---

<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=164918>

---

ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland