Elections in Sicily: Walkup to National General Elections

Judith Harris (November 07, 2017)

In a regional election Sunday in Sicily, a fledgling center-right coalition trounced the center-left, leaving former Premier Matteo Renzi and his party in deep trouble. The vote is seen as a harbinger of things to come when the nation goes to the polls next March.

ROME -- For a change the pollsters were on target. In a regional election Sunday in Sicily, a fledgling center-right coalition trounced the slightly center-left party of former Premier Matteo Renzi in deep trouble. The showing of the center-right coalition, which brought together three unlikely bedfellows, beginning with Silvio Berlusconi, is being seen as proof that middle-of-the road politics no longer work in Italy.

The confrontation in Sicily for the national leadership overshadowed the island vote itself. Renzi's Partito Democratico [2] (PD) won a mere 13.2% of the vote by comparison with its 33.6% in elections in the same Sicily just three years ago. In this election the PD headed a four-party center-left coalition who together won a mere 18.5%. This poor showing is seen as a serious forecast of things to come in March, when national general elections are slated under a brand new election law. The timing of that vote seems fairly secure unless, of course, the Partito Democratico-led government, headed by Premier Paolo Gentiloni [3] since last December, is brought down beforehand, as seems unlikely, at least at present.

Less than half those entitled to vote went to the polls, or 2.1 million out of 4.6 million, but the candidate backed by the center-right coalition for governor of Sicily, Nello Musumeci [4], walked away with a healthy 39%. Just four years ago, when Renzi's Partito Democratico won 40% of the national vote, it was considered an astonishing victory.

Former Premier Silvio Berlusconi (81 years old) was jubilant for successfully storming his back onto the political scene after a long hiatus caused by his judicial problems. These brought his being disallowed to hold public office, along with a period of enforced social service in a home for the aged at Cesano Boscone in 2014. But with the Sicilian vote he is back again as mover and shaker, and in a big way.

Berlusconi's two partners in the coalition, created less than one month ago, were Matteo Salvini, head of the Northern League [5] and Giorgia Meloni, head of a tiny party (perhaps 5% in national polls) called Fratelli d'Italia [6]. Needless to say, each of the trio of coalition partners, beginning with Berlusconi and his revived Forza Italia (perhaps to be renamed Rivoluzione Italia), claimed the victory as its success. Once entirely pro-Padania, Salvini, anti-EU and anti-immigrant, kited the League into a national political force, whose strength in Sicily is all the more surprising in light of its localized past. "Our votes were decisive for Musumecci," Salvini proclaimed proudly on Monday.

Meloni, 40, a former journalist and a new mother, said exactly the same. "Musumeci is my triumph," she said Tuesday. "With the candidate Silvio wanted [Prof. Gaetano Armao] we would have lost. I am very happy: when Fratelli d'Italia was born we had almost no resources, but today we are a determining force."

The normally aggressive Movimento Cinque Stelle [7] (M5S) trailed closely behind the center-right, winning 35%, or only 4% below the Berlusconi coalition. In fact, running on its own without partners, the M5S established itself as the most robust single party on the island. That said, the showing of the party now headed by Luigi Di Maio (but still identified with founding father, Beppe Grillo) showed weaknesses: the turnout of the young voters expected to vote M5S was poor, and the party has had a bad press recently due to the past year of scandals in its running two of Italy's largest and most important cities, Rome and Turin.

The Sicilian vote confirms the troubles facing Matteo Renzi and his party as well. After unexpectedly losing a crucial referendum on constitutional reform last December, he was obliged to resign as premier but took over as president of the PD. But the party was weakened seriously when Pier Luigi Bersani [8] and Massimo D'Alema [9], the party's leftists, split, creating their own mini-party, the Movimento Democratico e Progressista (MDP). Until this vote Renzi was the foremost PD candidate for premier, but challenges to his leadership are now legion.

After the Sicilian vote, the left itself is desperately seeking a way out. Although Renzi just declared, "They are not going to shove me aside," possible alternatives from the left for premier are under discussion. One is the respected Pietro Grasso [10], Italian Senate president since 2013, who would theoretically head a brand new (that is, to be created) left-leaning party or possibly join forces with Pier Luigi Bersani. Grasso resigned formally from the PD last week. Another potential candidate is Giuliano Pisapia [11], the no less respected independent former mayor of Milan, but who is already in conflict with the splinter leftist crowd under Bersani and D'Alema.

In the largest sense, then, Berlusconi is once again a force to be reckoned with -- but the only force just now able to reckon with him is the M5S.

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