

# Italian election campaign officially opens

By Peter Schwarz  
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Italian President Sergio Mattarella dissolved parliament on Thursday, officially opening the election campaign. The election will take place on March 4.

The decision came as no surprise. When the then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (PD) resigned a year ago, after losing the constitutional referendum, an election date was already being discussed. Mattarella insisted that a new valid electoral law and budget for the coming year be passed beforehand. Both have since happened. The budget was passed by the Senate, the second chamber of parliament, on the Saturday before Christmas.

Nevertheless, the announcement of the election has caused concern in European capitals. “As the EU tries to regain cohesion after the shock of the UK’s Brexit vote and speed up its economic recovery, the looming Italian election arguably represents the biggest political obstacle,” wrote the *Financial Times*.

The “likely scenarios after the vote” are “a hung parliament, a grand coalition or a populist government with a much more confrontational attitude towards Brussels—including plans to question Italy’s membership of the single currency.” With this, Italy will remain “the weak link” in the European Union.

Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, who, like his predecessor Matteo Renzi and his predecessor before him Enrico Letta, comes from the Democratic Party (PD), tried to spread optimism at his press conference at the end of the year. Italy was doing much better now than at the beginning of the 2013 legislature, he said. The economic situation was pleasing as Italy is “no longer the famous tail light of Europe.”

However, from the viewpoint of the mass of the population, the situation looks completely different. The generation of 18-year-olds who can vote for the first time has never experienced anything but social and political decline throughout their lives. Since Italy joined the eurozone in 1999 it has not experienced any

real economic growth. Industry produces less today than it did nearly two decades ago.

The unemployment rate is officially 11.1 percent, well above the EU average, and the real figure is likely to be much higher. Among young people, the official unemployment rate is 34.7 percent. A national debt of 130 percent of gross domestic product, more than twice as much as the EU allows, ensures that social decline will continue.

In the 18 years since the introduction of the euro, Italy has had 11 governments. Right-wing and centre-left governments followed one after the other; their politics hardly differed. While the right-wingers under Silvio Berlusconi were lining their own pockets, the centre-left governments under the leadership of the PD sought to put the public finances back in order at the expense of the working class.

The result is a deep alienation of the population from all political parties, which has led to a complete fragmentation of the party system.

According to the current polls, the strongest party is the Five Star Movement. Founded in 2009 by comedian Beppe Grillo, it had experienced a meteoric rise through its denunciation of the corruption of the ruling elites.

Meanwhile, the Five Star Movement has passed its zenith. Wherever it is in power in municipalities, such as the capital Rome, it has proved to be as corrupt as the old parties it denounced.

Politically, the Five Star Movement has moved sharply to the right. It represents a nationalist, anti-refugee course and sits in the same parliamentary group in the European Parliament as UKIP, which led the campaign for the Brexit referendum.

The 31-year-old Luigi Di Maio is the Five Star Movement’s lead candidate in the parliamentary election. However, it is far from having a government majority, with its current support running at 26 percent.

In contrast to the old election law, the strongest party will no longer receive a “bonus” following the election, awarding it additional seats. The Five Star Movement has so far rejected forming a coalition with any other party.

According to the current polls, the strongest force could be a right-wing alliance, with 35 percent, in which former head of government Silvio Berlusconi pulls the strings. After his removal from office in 2011, at the height of the debt crisis and involvement in numerous sex and bribery scandals, the now 81-year-old billionaire was politically isolated. Even now he is not allowed to hold political office due to a tax evasion conviction. Nevertheless, he could play the key role in forming the next government.

The right-wing alliance is extremely unstable. Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and right-wing Lega Nord, under 44-year-old Matteo Salvini, are competing for its leadership. They are currently polling with 16 percent and 14 percent respectively. The Lega Nord has developed from a northern Italian separatist movement into a national party and bases itself on the French National Front. Berlusconi is credited with concluding a coalition with the PD after the election, while some observers see a coming together of the Lega Nord with the Five Star Movement as possible.

In current surveys the former ruling PD is running at only 23 percent. It is campaigning with its leader Matteo Renzi as lead candidate, who hopes to return to the post of prime minister. However, current incumbent Paolo Gentiloni has far higher popularity ratings than Renzi.

The 42-year-old Renzi, who set out to “scrap” the elites in 2014, is hated by workers for his labour market reforms. The PD, like many other social democratic parties in Europe, is in disarray. In the past year, two groups split off and together with Sinistra Italiana (SI, Italian Left) founded the Liberi e Uguali (LeU, Free and Equal). The former ruling PD is campaigning with Pietro Grasso as lead candidate, who has made a name for himself as a prosecutor and judge against the Sicilian mafia. Currently, they are polling 6.5 percent.

The upcoming election campaign threatens to become one of the dirtiest in Italian history. Since no party has an answer to the burning social issues, they strive to outdo each other in their anti-refugee rhetoric and right-wing demagoguery.

While the Lega Nord and the Five Star Movement would no longer allow any refugees into the country and want to deport as many as possible, the Democrats boast that they have drastically reduced the inflow across the Mediterranean. Interior Minister Marco Minniti has agreed a dirty deal with Islamist militias and smugglers in Libya who are paid and armed by the Italian government to intercept, detain and torture refugees.

The social opposition of the Italian working class finds no political expression in the current political system. It will look for other, more militant ways to catch its breath.

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