

Italy: Five Star Movement makes a deal with the far-right League

By Marianne Arens and Peter Schwarz
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Three weeks after the Italian parliamentary election, the protest movement Five Star (M5S) and the far-right League (Northern League) have moved closer together, and they might now form a coalition government.

The leaders of the two parties, 45-year-old Matteo Salvini (League) and 31-year-old Luigi Di Maio (M5S), are in constant contact. Salvini noted a few days ago that he speaks to Di Maio on the phone more often than to his own mother. Due to this close cooperation, the leaders of the two chambers of parliament were smoothly elected over the weekend. According to press reports, Di Maio and Salvini are working on a joint government programme.

The M5S and the alliance of far-right parties—the League, Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and the fascistic Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy)—elected Roberto Fico (M5S) as president of the Chamber of Deputies and Elisabetta Alberti Casellati (Forza Italia) as speaker of the Senate.

The election is remarkable because, shortly before the parliamentary elections, Di Maio had promised that M5S would “never” engage in intrigues and deals behind closed doors. Roberto Fico, the new president of the Chamber of Deputies, declared: “I guarantee we will never ally ourselves with the League: it is genetically different.” But that is exactly what has happened. The election of the two Chamber presidents was the result of secret intrigues and deals between M5S and the League.

M5S, which owed its election success to its proclaimed opposition to corruption, previously presented Berlusconi and his Forza Italia as its arch-enemies. Now, M5S has elevated Casellati, a “super-Berlusconian,” into the country’s second highest state office. The speaker of the Senate automatically assumes the duties of president if 76-year-old Sergio Mattarella is unable to carry out his duties.

The lawyer Casellati, who holds a doctorate in church

law, is an opponent of abortion and gay marriage. She has sat in parliament for Forza Italia since 1994. She has supported all of Berlusconi’s campaigns against the judiciary, drafted laws that protected him from trials for corruption, and defended him on talk shows and on demonstrations. She is also implicated in corrupt practices after hiring her daughter as secretary of state at the Ministry of Health.

Casellati, however, was not Berlusconi’s choice. The former head of government favoured Paolo Romani, a minister from his last cabinet. But Salvini, whose League achieved a bigger share of the vote in the election than Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, is now calling the shots in the far-right camp. He nevertheless chose a candidate from Forza Italia and not from his own party because he needs Berlusconi’s support to become head of government.

Negotiations on the new government begin after Easter, when President Mattarella invites the various parties for consultations. Former Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni (PD) has submitted his resignation, as required by the constitution, and is now leading a caretaker government until a new government takes over.

Theoretically, there are four options for a governing majority in the 630-seat lower house, but they all face significant problems—a coalition of M5S (227 seats) with the League alone (125 seats), a coalition of the M5S with the entire far-right alliance (265 seats), a coalition of the latter alliance with the Democrats (PD) (112 seats), or a coalition of the M5S with the Democrats.

M5S and the League have a small majority, even without the participation of Forza Italia, but this immediately raises the question of who takes over as head of government. Both Di Maio and Salvini have laid claim to the post. The M5S parliamentary faction is almost twice as large as the League’s, so Di Maio is disinclined to allow Salvini to head the government. The situation is different when the entire far-right alliance participates in

the government. Together it has more deputies than M5S.

For a long time, the League and M5S were considered to be politically irreconcilable. The League, which emerged from the separatist Northern League, is following a far-right-wing course. Its role model is the National Front of Marine Le Pen in France. It has its base in the prosperous north of the country and has promised to deport half a million migrants and reduce taxes to 15 percent if it comes to power.

M5S poses as a protest party that stands “neither right nor left,” and as an opponent of the corrupt Italian political caste. It achieved its greatest electoral successes with the promise of a universal basic income in the south, where poverty, unemployment and precarious work prevail.

After the close cooperation of the past few days, however, an alliance between the two parties looks increasingly possible. What unites them is their criticism of the European Union (EU) and the common European currency. Both have stated that they will not stick to the EU limit of 3 percent of GDP for the government deficit. In Brussels and Berlin, such a ruling alliance in Italy is therefore considered a “horror scenario.” The League and M5S also largely concur in their hostility to immigrants.

The basic income promised by the M5S is far from “universal.” It is more like an Italian version of Germany’s Hartz IV payments. According to a parliamentary proposal of M5S, it would only be paid under certain conditions. An amount of €780 per month would be given to those who are permanently registered at Job Centres and accept at least their third job offer. Above all, the basic income would be paid exclusively to Italian nationals, thereby further deepening divisions in the working class.

Meanwhile, the founder of M5S, the comedian Beppe Grillo, has signalled his agreement to an alliance with the League. “Salvini is one who keeps his word when he says something. That’s rare,” Grillo declared. Salvini returned the compliment: “The Grillini have so far proven to be trustworthy.”

Silvio Berlusconi has called on the president to entrust the formation of the government to League leader Salvini. “The centre right received the most votes and thus has the right to appoint the prime minister, he told the *Corriere della Sera*. Salvini has the right and duty to try to form a government.”

Berlusconi, who has always been at loggerheads with the M5S, prefers an alliance with the Democrats (PD), the main losers in the parliamentary election. Such a coalition

would only have a majority if the entire right-wing alliance is involved. The PD would be the strongest single party and could claim the office of prime minister—a move that would be hardly in the interests of Salvini.

The last option, a coalition of the M5S with the Democrats, would be dominated by M5S, which could claim the office of prime minister. So far, it is unlikely that the PD would support the 31-year-old Di Maio in this endeavour.

All that is certain is that the horse-trading will continue behind the scenes in the coming weeks. Whether the pact between Di Maio and Salvini holds is hard to predict, let alone what other deals may be offered, made or rejected.

Ultimately, the extreme crisis of Italian politics is the result of the deep gulf between the needs and aspirations of the broad mass of the population and all of the parties represented in parliament. None of them has an answer to the horrendous levels of youth unemployment, declining incomes and the social crisis that dominate in the country.

Using populist demagogy, the M5S and the League were able to win a considerable number of votes, but a government of these two parties, like any other conceivable coalition, would pursue a far-right political agenda and rapidly come into sharp conflict with the working class. Only an independent movement of the working class, fighting for an international socialist programme, can prevent the country from drifting further to the right.

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