

Italy: Democrats, Five-Star Movement call for technocratic government

By Marianne Arens
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Last night, the Italian Senate decided that the parliamentary vote of no confidence that is expected to mark the end of the current government will take place on Tuesday, August 20, following a speech by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

The 345 members of the Senate had been recalled from their traditional summer holidays because their party leaders were unable to agree on a course of action on Monday. The far-right Lega party had announced its lack of confidence in Conte on August 9, after its leader, Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, formed a coalition government with Conte's Five-Star Movement (M5S) over on August 7.

Salvini is aiming to hold new elections and to become the leader of a far-right government. His party received 34 percent of the votes in the recent European elections and has since recorded stronger polling results. He wants to form a coalition with the fascist *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy), with Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*, or with both. On Tuesday, Salvini had talks with *Fratelli d'Italia* leader Giorgia Meloni and with Berlusconi.

However, the decision on the what steps to take next lies with President Sergio Mattarella of the opposition Democratic Party (PD). If the government falls next week, he has three options: to find a new majority in the existing Senate, call new elections or appoint a "technocratic" transitional government.

Currently, the strongest proponent of a technocratic government is former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (PD), who vehemently opposes new elections. He has declared that an unelected government is needed to save Italy from an "extremist course," reduce the size of parliament, and push through the next budget with European Union (EU) approval before new elections. He thus directly plays into the hands of Salvini, who

could present himself Tuesday in the Senate as a "true democrat" wanting to "give the people the vote."

Salvini's previous coalition partner, the M5S, also rejects new elections, after party founder Beppe Grillo spoke out against it on his blog. The M5S also wants to approve the budget and reduce the size of the parliament before new elections are held. They would also lose about half their seats if a vote took place now.

On Tuesday evening, the M5S and PD together blocked a vote of confidence from taking place in the Senate as Salvini had demanded. Since then, speculation has continued in Rome as to whether the two parties, which have been public political enemies, will form a new ruling coalition. They could jointly secure a parliamentary majority supporting a technocratic government appointed by the president.

Salvini's speech in the Senate was interrupted several times by loud denunciations from senators of the PD and its breakaway, LeU (*Liberi e Uguali*). This parliamentary opposition to Salvini is from the right, however. It is not directed against Salvini's fascist and anti-refugee policy, which was fully supported by the M5S, the new ally of the PD, for 14 months, but against his threats to ignore the EU's limits on Italian budget deficits.

"Should Salvini really become prime minister, then the budgetary process and the negotiations with the EU will be very, very difficult. There is no doubt about that," wrote Markus Will, an economics professor at the University of St. Gallen, who warned of the budget deficits and that Italy's public debt is set to reach 135 percent of its gross domestic product. "Structural and infrastructure reforms are needed. What is needed is a pension cut and tax reform."

In other words, what is needed is a government that works even more closely with the banks and with the

EU to pay off the mountain of debt. Italy's relations with the EU are already highly strained after automatic deficit proceedings were narrowly averted in June. The dispute revolves around how to impose further attacks on the working class and suppress growing social opposition.

As an analysis by the Roman office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which is close to Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Union, showed that the lack of prospects for the population is so great that not only are youth emigrating, but pensioners are going abroad "to flee from the tax burden and the high cost of living. Italy transferred around 400,000 pensions abroad in 2018—and the figure is rising," the study stated.

These sharp social tensions have been expressed in recent days in loud protests wherever Salvini has appeared. So far, the media has reported very little about this opposition, which met the interior minister and leader of Lega on his summer tour through the south. People took to the streets in Sicily and several cities in southern Italy to protest against the imminent danger of an extremely right-wing government with the participation of the fascists.

"*Basta Salvini*" (Down with Salvini!) was the most common slogan. In Catania, after Salvini visited the town hall, an angry crowd prevented his car from leaving, while hours of fights and angry discussions with Lega supporters occurred in front of the city's Cathedral.

In Naples, Salvini had to be protected by a thick police cordon when hundreds of young people blocked the streets. The protest banner said, "This Lega is a disgrace. Never with Salvini!" The posters bore inscriptions like "Salvini's decree, a gift to the mafia" and "*Napoli non si lega*"—a play on words in which "Lega" means both the party name and the verb "tie up": Naples cannot be tied up.

"We are all anti-fascists" was another slogan often heard during Salvini's propaganda appearances in Basilicata and Northern Italy. Protesters chanted, "Open the ports!" For 10 days now, hundreds of migrants on the two NGO ships Open Arms and Ocean Viking have been waiting on the Mediterranean for a safe haven, which the Italian government vehemently refuses.

In the south of Italy, many voted for the M5S in the

last parliamentary elections because their slogan "Neither right nor left" seemed to promise to bring a breath of fresh air to Rome and end corruption. In the May 2019 European elections, many of these voters abstained, contributing to the M5S's collapse, while the Lega whipped up its right-wing base with xenophobic agitation.

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