

Resignation of Italian Prime Minister Conte triggers government crisis

By Marianne Arens
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Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte submitted his resignation to President Sergio Mattarella on Tuesday evening, but remains in office in a caretaker role until a successor is chosen by parliament. The 65th government of the Italian Republic has thus come to an end.

Conte, who has been in office since June 2018 and is not a member of any party, resigned before a vote of no confidence. The head of the right-wing radical Lega, Matteo Salvini, broke up the coalition with the Five Star Movement (M5S) two weeks ago in the hope of becoming prime minister himself through early elections. Based on favourable survey results, the head of Lega hoped to form a government together with the Fratelli d'Italia, the direct successor to Benito Mussolini's Italian fascist party.

It is not at all certain that Salvini will reach his goal, particularly in the short-term. Both the opposition Democratic Party (PD) and the Five Star Movement have indicated the possibility of forming a joint government to avoid new elections. Together, the two parties would have a narrow majority.

PD leader Nicola Zingaretti said after a party leadership meeting: “We are extremely open to examine the conditions for a 'government of change' that serves our country at a time that is so difficult democratically, economically and socially.”

There were similar signals from M5S. According to Italian media reports, its leader, Deputy Prime Minister Luigi di Maio, has already contacted Zingaretti to discuss the possibility of a joint, stable government. Whether such a government will come into being, however, is questionable. The two parties had fought fiercely so far.

The next step is at the discretion of the 78-year-old President Mattarella, who himself comes from the PD.

If no new coalition is formed, he could also appoint a government of experts, which would then also require a parliamentary majority. If Mattarella opts for new elections, which is considered unlikely, they must take place within 60 days. One last possibility would be for the Lega and the Five Star Movement to resume their coalition.

The most immediate task of the next government is to present a budget that complies with European Union deficit guidelines by October 15, which will require massive cuts at the expense of the working class. If the PD and the Five Stars take on this task, Salvini and Lega, which would then nominally be in opposition, could be further strengthened.

There was a debate in the Senate before Conte's resignation. In a 50-minute speech, he settled accounts with his Interior Minister Salvini, with whom he had worked closely until two weeks ago. He accused Salvini, whom he consistently addressed by his first name as “caro Matteo” (dear Matteo), of personal striving for power and irresponsibility and criticized him for wantonly provoking a “serious crisis” which “has serious consequences for the country, for economic, financial, political and social life.”

Salvini, for his part, demonstratively switched from the government bench to the Lega faction before his reply. From there he ferociously attacked the government of which he himself had been a member for the last fourteen months. To the thunderous applause of the fascists and Lega deputies, he boasted that he had closed Italy's ports to migrants, declaring that he would “do it all over again, everything!” He, Salvini, acts “without fear, proud and sovereign” and was “not dependent on Merkel and Macron.”

In yesterday's debate in the Senate, there was only one voice that spoke at all about the fate of the boat

refugees. It was the former EU Commissioner for Human Rights and Radical Party MEP Emma Bonino, a 71-year-old cancer-stricken woman. Bonino however did not represent any progressive perspective either. In the end, she appealed only to President Mattarella to make a wise decision.

While the Senate session was still going on, a scene at the island of Lampedusa vividly showed the consequences of the anti-refugee policy. There, a few hundred meters from the coast, the situation on the refugee ship “Open Arms” escalated, and several people who had been hoping for a safe harbour for almost three weeks desperately jumped into the sea to swim to the shore. Finally, in the late evening, the ship was able to bring the last 83 migrants ashore, while the responsible public prosecutor's office of Agrigento confiscated the ship.

The government's dealings with the refugees are symptomatic of the dangers threatening the entire population. This applies not only to Salvini's Lega, but to all parties, including the opposition Democrats (PD). With their right-wing austerity policy while in power, the PD set the course for the now failed government. In refugee policy, it was especially Salvini's predecessor, the PD Minister of the Interior Marco Minniti, who three years ago, in cooperation with the Libyan coastguard, sealed off the Mediterranean Sea and turned it into a mass grave.

The response of the PD opposition in the Senate was an attack on Salvini and Conte from the right. Former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (PD) declared that the government was leaving an economic fiasco behind, and now it was primarily a matter of approving the budget. Only in this way could an increase in value added tax (VAT) be avoided. Not seeing this, and provoking a government crisis right now, is tantamount to a coup d'état and is “a game at the expense of the Italians,” Renzi said. Italy is facing a recession, he continued, and “the population will suffer as a result.”

Renzi left no doubt that his party was prepared to impose an austerity budget in line with EU demands. “All of Europe is looking to us,” Renzi shouted. The fact that such a budget would require savings of 30 billion euros clearly shows what “suffering” he himself is prepared to impose on the population.

In order to distract from this right-wing policy, Renzi accused the Lega interior minister of undue closeness

to Russia. Instead of the euro, he wanted to “perhaps even introduce the ruble.” He went on to ask the Lega leader, “In your own interest, finally clarify your relations with the Russians.”

The former EU Commissioner and former Prime Minister Romano Prodi made an even more right-wing proposal to resolve the crisis, an alliance given the title “*Maggioranza Orsola*” (Ursula majority). By this he meant a grand coalition of all parties that had voted in the European Parliament for former German Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen as the new EU Commission President in mid-July—the Five Star Movement, the Democrats and the Forza Italia of billionaire media mogul and three-time Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

One could not show more clearly that all parties agree to take an extremely right-wing course in the direction of war and austerity policy. Von der Leyen is a prime example of European military policy; as German Defence Minister she had previously actively supported the foreign and security policy changes by the Merkel government, involving military build-up and the dispatch of the German military to numerous overseas operations, and in response to the refugee crisis she wants to build up the European border and coastal protection agency Frontex even faster than before.

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