

Berlusconi. The Beginning of the End

Judith Harris (October 02, 2013)



After threatening to torpedo the government, Silvio Berlusconi voted today to continue to share power with the Partito Democratico (PD). The former Premier's surprise about-face, with the support of his entire parliamentary group, means that the five-months-old government headed by Enrico Letta continues in office, and postpones recourse to early national general elections. The great



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ROME - Following weeks of threats that he would torpedo the government, Silvio Berlusconi and his entire center-right parliamentary group voted today to continue to share power in their five-months-old coalition with the center-left Partito Democratico (PD). The lower house confirmed the vote later in the day, the former Premier's surprise about-face in the Senate, with 235 votes in favor, 70 opposed and no absences. The successful confidence vote guarantees, at least for the time being, the continuity of the five-months-old government headed by Premier Enrico Letta and postpones recourse to early national general elections only six months after the last. The great mediator in the situation was President Giorgio Napolitano, more popular with the public than ever.

"We have shown that the government is not collapsing, and I intend to continue to work," Letta said in accepting the vote. "But there can be no more blackmail attempts, no more noisy quarrels [within the coalition]. We have had 14 governments in the same period of time that the Germans had just three. Now we have to show that we understand that we must meet the expectations of the Italians." In his acceptance Letta also quoted Pope Francis.

Speaking briefly in the Senate, Berlusconi said, "Considering the expectations, and the fact that Italy needs a government that can produce institutional and structural reforms, we have decided, not without internal struggles, in favor of the vote of confidence." In fact, the internal struggles he mentioned help to explain his about-face. Berlusconi's party is now splintered in two, with reciprocal insults in public between his die-hard supporters and the dissidents requesting a less autocratic party. Moreover, while their leader survives for the moment, his personal role is diminished, and what is called here "Berlusconismo" - that is, an uncritical acceptance of uncontested leadership, with no discussion or debate permitted - is at an end. At the very least it is the beginning of the end for Berlusconi. As "qualified European sources" in Brussels commented (reiterated in the financial daily *Il Sole/24 Ore*), Berlusconi is "becoming more marginal."

Behind his unexpected support of the Letta government was the opening of a split within his Freedom party (the PdL, now more or less renamed as Forza Italia), spearheaded by none other than his normally supine second-in-command, Angelino Alfano. Only one of Berlusconi's last ditch but futile efforts was to try to persuade his parliamentary group to refuse in bloc to take part in today's vote. The tactic flopped, and, after protesting that their party has fallen into the hands of extremists, some 26 members of Parliament announced Wednesday a formal breach with the PdL in order to create within Parliament an autonomous group of moderates, to be called Nuovo Italia (New Italy), headed by former Berlusconi stalwart Fabrizio Cicchitto. The new formation includes a robust faction of staunch Catholics.

Another reason for Berlusconi's move is that money talks, and the stability of the government is almost instantly monetized. As news of this schism became public Tuesday afternoon, suggesting that the Letta government would survive the confidence vote, the Italian stock market surged in response by 3.11%. The news of the dissidents' likely vote for Letta sent stocks in Berlusconi's own media corporation, Mediaset, bouncing up by 6.6%, while the spread (i.e., the difference between Italian and German state bond interest) remained stable at 256, shrinking by a few points after the successful confidence vote.

During the long morning debate the atmosphere in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate turned extremely emotional, and Berlusconi himself turned weepy at the end of his speech in the



Senate. His ever faithful lieutenant Sandro Bondi, former Culture Minister in the Berlusconi government, was also almost nearly in tears as he claimed that the Italian economy had worsened under Letta (untrue) and is responsible for the tremendously high level of unemployment (also untrue, since in office only five months).

In truth, unemployment remains a concern, for it has risen to over 40% among youths between age 15 and 35. Also painfully in the background were the deaths of at least thirteen immigrants who had arrived from Libya but been cast out of a ramshackle boat by smugglers near the shore at Ragusa in Sicily. Using belts and chains, the smugglers had forced the immigrants to jump into deep waters. Those who did not know how to swim drowned only a short distance from a tourist beach. Italy is now host to nearly 5,000 refugees from Syria, and within the past week new immigrants continue to arrive at the rate of nearly 300 a day.

But there was also a few occasions for lighter moments. One was Berlusconi's much-photographed arrival at his apartment in Rome's Palazzo Grazioli with, cuddled on his shoulder, his girlfriend Francesca's little white fluffy dog Dudu'. More seriously, the PdL dissidents had described themselves as "diversamente Berlusconi," a play on words for diversamente abile (diversely able), the au courant politically correct term for disabled. From an Italian association of the diversely able came outraged protests that their term would be applied to a political faction.

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