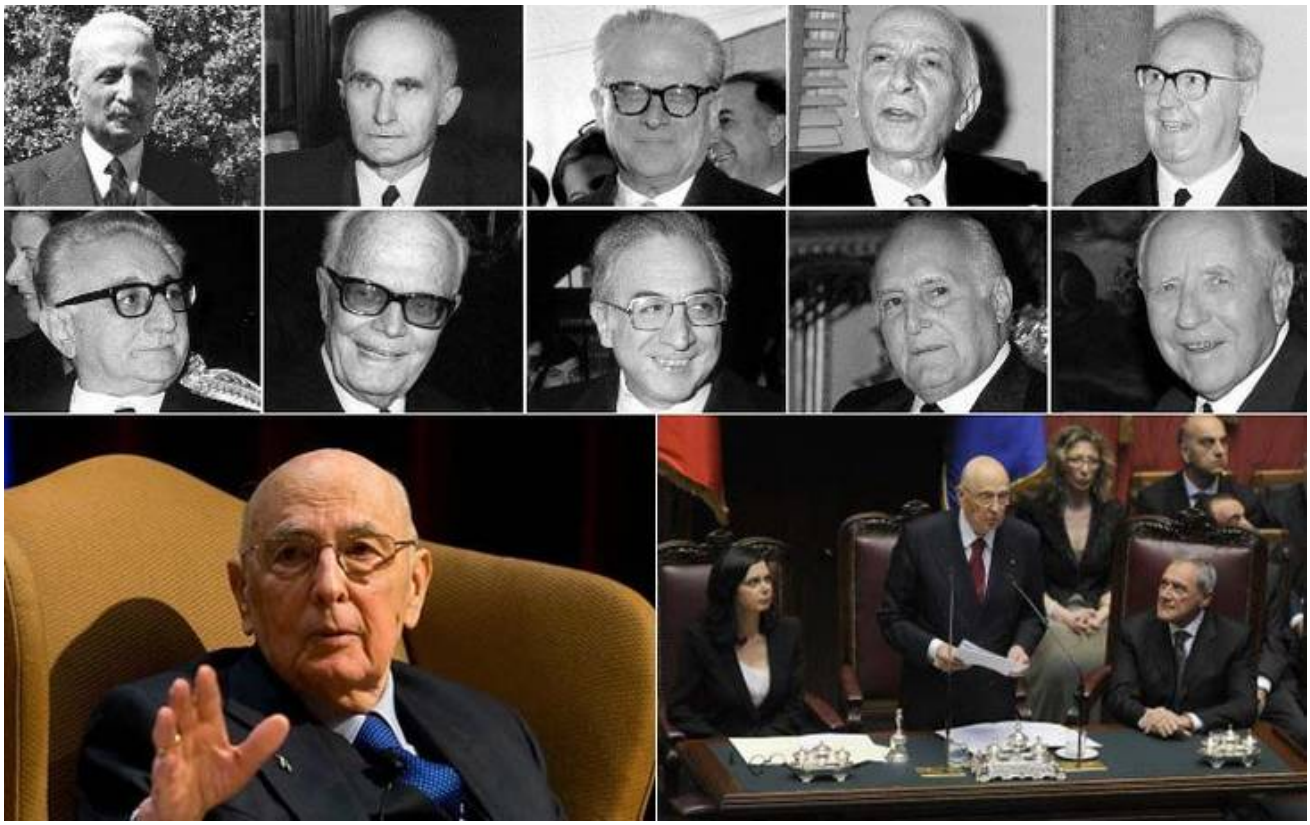
A Potted Guide to Italian Presidents

Judith Harris (January 06, 2015)



It now appears certain that Giorgio Napolitano will resign as of Jan. 14, at the top of Italy's current political agenda is election of his successor. Before this happens, let's consider what the function of an Italian president is – unlike the royals of Britain or Spain, he is far more than a ceremonial figurehead – and then take a backward look at the presidents of the past.

Rome – Now that it appears certain that Giorgio Napolitano will resign as of Jan. 14, at the top of Italy's political agenda for 2015 is election of his successor. To help prepare for the newcomer, let's first consider what the function of an Italian president is, and then take a backward look at those from the past. Unlike the royals of Britain or Spain, the Italian president is far more than a ceremonial figurehead.

Among his multiple duties are to defend the Constitution; to ensure that the politicians do not abuse their power; to dissolve Parliament as needed; to oversee national general elections; to conduct discussions for a new government after those elections; and to appoint a premier and his cabinet. Over time, the job description has somewhat changed, however, as we shall see.

The first head of state was provisional, Enrico De Nicola, a Liberal, appointed after abrogation of the monarchy in January 1948. Most historians agree that the real first president, serving from May 1948 to May 1955, was the much admired Luigi Einaudi, a Liberal economist and wine producer who taught at the University of Turin. During the harshest years of Fascism, Einaudi, a Liberal, taught at a university in Geneva, returning to Italy in January of 1945.

His successor until May of 1962 was Giovanni Gronchi, the first Christian Democrat (DC) to be president. A left-leaning founder of the Catholic-oriented Partito Popolare, he opposed the Fascist government in the Twenties, returning to political life only in mid-1942; in 1943 he helped to found the CD. His election was discouraged by the centrists but supported by both right and left, including the Italian Communist party (PCI).

Then came another DC president, Antonio Segni. Elected in May 1963 he served only until December of 1964. Like his predecessors, he had taken no part in another Italian politics during the Fascist era. His resignation was formally motivated by illness, but his term was tainted by serious rumors of a coup d'etat in the works, called the Piano Solo.

Leone's successor marked a radical political change. Giuseppe Saragat of the Social Democratic party (PSDI)was president from December 1964 through December 1971. He was elected with 646 votes out of 963 cast. During his term the Milan Agricultural Bank bombing, took place in December 1969 in Piazza Fontana, killing 17 and launching a long season of terrorism. Initially blamed on anarchists, later investigations led to a rightist conspiracy involving secret service elements.

On his heels came another Catholic, noted legal expert Giovanni Leone, who had been an alternative to Saragat the previous election. After two full weeks of balloting he won in late December 1971, with 518 votes of 996 from a center-right coalition that included the neo-Fascist Italian Social Movement (MS). On his watch Aldo Moro was kidnapped and murdered by Red Brigades in May l978. One month later Leone resigned, dodging impeachment proceedings over allegations of bribes (unproven) supposedly received from the Lockheed Aircraft Corp.

A form of national redemption came in mid-1978 through June 1985 with the presidency of the former partisan leader Sandro Pertini. He was elected after 16 ballots by an extraordinary consensus, 832 of 995 votes. One of Italy's most popular and admired presidents, he had been sentenced to death by the SS during WWII but escaped prison. By this time the role of president had been expanded from the earliest leaders. (For a full biography in Italian, see >>> [2]).

Francesco Cossiga restored the Christian Democratic party to the Quirinal Palace, and was elected in mid-1985 with a two-thirds majority; it was the first time anyone was elected on a first ballot. Cossiga's watch was, to put it mildly. These were the "years of lead" (terrorism), and Cossiga had been Interior Minister both when Aldo Moro was murdered in 1978 and when two years later, when neo-Fascists bombed the Bologna train station, killing 85 and wounding 200. He clashed with then Premier Giulio Andreotti and at one point formally resigned from the DC. By the time he left office in early 1992 both the DC and, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the PCI too had faded away. Impeachment proceedings were begun against him but were dropped.

The murder in Sicily of anti-Mafia judge Giovanni Falcone were the background for the election of the staunchly Catholic Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, 74, in May 1992. Italy's ninth president, he was elected with the backing of the new and left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD). During his term of office, which lasted until 1997, he saw, with disapproval, many of his former Christian Democrats shift into the party founded by Silvio Berlusconi in the early 1990s.

The head of Italy's central bank Carlo Azeglio Ciampi was a technician chosen to succeed Scalfaro in mid-1999. Like many of his predecessors, he had an anti-Fascist background and had been hidden in the Abruzzi region to avoid German occupation in WWII. Ciampi was very popular with the Parliament, which elected him with 707 of 1010 votes, and with the public, whose polls gave him ratings of up to 80%.

At age 80 Giorgio Napolitano succeeded Ciampi in May of 2006, with 543 of 1,009 ballots. Originally

a PCI loyalist, he headed the party's international relations wing, but was recognized as the head of its most liberal wing. He took a certain distance from the party early on, and I personally met him at the home of a US diplomat in 1975, two decades before the PCI imploded; not long afterward he had a series of private meetings with Richard Gardner, US Ambassador to Italy from 1977 to 1981. When Napolitano's presidential term expired in 2013, a three-way political stalemate blocked naming his successor, and he reluctantly agreed to succeed himself. The governments appointed under his presidency have had widely differing political casts: Silvio Berlusconi's on the right, Romano Prodi's on the left, Mario Monti's apolitical technical babysitter government, Enrico Letta's center-left, and, currently, Matteo Renzi's left-centrist cabinet.

Links
[1] http://iitaly.org/files/napolitanopresidenti1420569409jpg
[2] http://www.centropertini.org/biografia.htm