

Big City Elections Jolt Italy

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Elections in key Italian cities have sent an electric shock throughout Italy. In Sunday's run-off in Rome, Virginia Raggi of the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), who won just over one-third in preliminary elections two weeks ago, was elected mayor with a stunning two-thirds of the vote. "We're in charge, we punished them!" crowed a delighted Beppe Grillo, founding father of the M5S.

ROME -- Local run-off elections in key Italian cities have sent an electric shock that is jolting Italy. Premier Matteo Renzi is the big loser in Sunday's series of mayoral run-off's that have taken place throughout Italy. In the race for mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, 37, candidate for the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), walked away with over two-thirds of the vote (67.2%). In preliminary elections two weeks ago she won only one-third (35.3%).

Whereas the international media have emphasized that Raggi is female, seen from Rome the gender issue matters less than the fact that, rather than female politicians, this election legitimizes the M5S and its founding father, comedian Beppe Grillo. Only eight years ago the Grillo forces won just 2.6% of the vote in Rome, but he has moved upward fast: in the national elections of 2013 the party elected 109 MPs and 54 senators (25.5% and 23.7% respectively).

Needless to say, Grillo himself was in Rome for the Sunday night victory celebration. "We're in

charge, we punished them!" a delighted Grillo crowed as the news spread through the M5S crowd. Grillo is the quintessence of an anti-establishment politician, and likes to refer to his M5S as a "movement," rather than a party. But lawyer Raggio's triumph in Rome propels the Grillo forces onto the national scene.

The conservative parties formerly identified with ex-Premier Silvio Berlusconi were unable to come to any significant accord in Rome, and hence their votes contributed to Raggi's victory. As Berlusconi faithful Mariastella Gelmini acknowledged today, "If Raggi is that strong, it's also due to the problems of the center-right." Some votes also came from disaffected former supporters of the (slightly) left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD), whose Rome organization (and not only that) is currently racked by its quarreling left fringes and by scandals from PD city administrators.

This local litmus test is far more than a warning shot. Prior to the vote Premier Renzi said repeatedly that there is no link between local and national elections, but at this point that is patently untrue. He has enacted a few reforms, the most important of which is an attempt to boost employment (his so-called "Jobs Act"), but their effects are barely visible. At risk for Renzi is a national deadline in October, when his proposal for a constitutional reform that will whittle away the Italian Senate itself is due for a referendum vote.

Either his PD -- and he is, controversially, head of the party as well as of the government -- must rethink, reorganize and reform, or he will be out of both jobs within the next four or five months, despite the fact that at present no serious alternative exists to his governing coalition, a peculiar blend of center-left and moderate right.

The second shock came in Turin, where Grillo's candidate Chiara Appendino, 32, was elected mayor. Two weeks ago Appendino, like Raggi an attractive female with limited political experience, won only 31% of the vote, but in Sunday's run-off the vote for the M5S surged up to 55.4%. Unlike Rome, Turin has not been tainted with Mafia-style corruption and indeed the administration of her opponent, the center-left's Mayor Piero Fassino of the PD, has been consistently praised. Nevertheless, in the run-off, Fassino won less than 45% (42% two weeks ago).

Fortunately for Renzi, the PD fared positively in Milan, where candidate Giuseppe ("Beppe") Sala won 51.7% of the vote, running on a center-left list headed by the PD. Sala, who was Milan city manager from 2009 through 2010 under Mayor Letizia Moratti, rose to fame for his resoundingly successful management of last year's Universal Exposition, or Expo, after its tainted beginning. One of his campaign slogans, tellingly: "This is not a vote for or against Renzi -- it is for Beppe Sala."

Still, with over 48% of the vote, Sala's right-wing opponent, Stefano Parisi, ran close enough behind that Italy's conservatives are encouraged because the future of the Italian conservative movement is so evidently threatened by Grillo. Parisi's decent showing was the result of his successful forging of a center-right coalition linking, among others, Berlusconi's ailing Forza Italia with Matteo Salvini's aggressive Northern League. The vote signaled the definitive exit from politics of Silvio Berlusconi after a quarter century.

Illustrating the problems of both PD and conservatives, in Naples Luigi De Magistris, a former judge, won handily with almost 66% of the vote against the center-right candidate Gianni Lettieri, with 34.4%. De Magistris, who has challenged the PD in Rome, created his own center-left coalition.

What will Raggi do in Rome? She is on record as calling for an immediate, full financial report on city expenditures, which she has proposed to put on line for all citizens to see. She also opposes the city's bid to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2024 -- "No prejudice against them but let's first handle ordinary administration," she says -- but the pressures to go forward will be strong. Rome's candidacy was formally offered in February, but some here are demanding a referendum to oppose it. A reversal will be contentious.



Links

[1] <http://iitaly.org/files/roma1466432108jpg>