

Elections, Expulsions and the Polls

Judith Harris (March 07, 2014)



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when the new law, nicknamed the "Italicum," is expected to be put before the assembly for a vote. Its clauses are important, but don't make particularly easy reading:

--For a single party to be represented in Parliament it must receive a minimum 8% of the vote. If instead it is part of a coalition, the party can have as little as 4.5%; below that, nothing. Finally, in order for a coalition to be represented, its votes must total at least 12%. (Phew.)

--A candidate can run in--guess what--as many as eight different electoral colleges. (No comment on this one.)

--The coalition which wins more than 37% of the vote wins the jackpot of 55% of the members of Parliament. (This is considered an important forward step because in the past two elections the premium could be won with as low as 30% of the vote.)

--If no coalition wins that coveted 37%, the two leading coalitions have a run-off, and the victor has 55% of the MPs. (The reasoning behind these last two clauses is called governability.)

Political observers here say that the original deal hammered out by Renzi and Berlusconi has been skillfully watered down by none other than Renzi's partner in government, Angelino Alfano, who heads of New Center-Right (Nuovo Centro Destra, NCD). "Half their deal is gone," said Ugo Magri of the Turin daily La Stampa. In addition, Alfano is expected to challenge the 4.5% minimum required for Parliament so as to allow the numerous still smaller parties to be represented. The Italicum is therefore not yet a shoo-in.

The biggest and most criticized issue is the future of the Senate. Renzi has repeatedly announced that it will simply be abolished. This presupposes a constitutional change, however, a slow process which does not fit into Renzi's Speedy Gonzales image (as some here have dubbed him). Those who want the Senate simply to disappear maintain that it is too close a replica of the Chamber--a virtual clone--and that the requirement for its cooperation in passing legislation is a handicap since bills drift back and forth repeatedly from the lower to the upper house, creating stagnation.

But people here are also asking what kind of an election law it will be that simply ignores the Senate altogether. In addition, when and why should the Senate vote itself out of existence, and will President Giorgio Napolitano go along with this?

Speaking of the Senate, Beppe Grillo remains on the warpath and this week chucked out five more senators from his Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) for rebellious behavior. Out of the original 54 M5S seated in the Senate, 13 are now gone; eleven who were actually expelled because considered disobedient to party discipline, and two who resigned in protest against what they consider purges. More expulsions are reportedly in the wings, and will, like this week's expelled senators, be voted by the M5S on-line membership. At just the same time, ironically, Grillo's grizzled brain-truster and internet guru Gianroberto Casaleggio was meeting in Milan to woo a handful of business leaders.

It is not surprising that the rightist Il Giornale headline gloated, "The Grillini are rebelling. One elector of three does not appreciate the purges." According to a new poll conducted by Ixe', support for Grillo's party, which more or less led the pack until recently with around 30% of popular backing, has now slumped to 21%. The same Ixe' polls suggest that Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD) has moved forward, if only slightly, to a 30% approval rating. Berlusconi's revived Forza Italia has crept up to 22.8%, a fairly good showing because its split with the Alfano group is so recent. Altogether the center-left and center-right coalitions appear neck-to-neck. If the polls can be trusted, the center-left would probably total 36.5%, and the center-right, 36.1%--too close to be called, too close to allow guessing as to who would win that coveted 55%.



A footnote: Renzi and his predecessor, Enrico Letta, are no longer on speaking terms, with Renzi claiming that Letta's government under-stated the depths of the financial problems facing Italy, chastized by the European Union.

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