

Bersani Treks Uphill, but to Where?

Judith Harris (March 25, 2013)



One month after Italy's national general elections, Pier Luigi Bersani, leader of the Partito Democratico (PD), is trudging up a political Mount Everest whose peak hides, invisible, in the clouds. When President Giorgio Napolitano tapped him last week to begin testing the ground for creation of a new government, in essence Bersani was asked to resolve the three-way split that pits his PD against both the rightist Liberty Party (PdL) of former Premier Silvio Berlusconi and the forces of self-righteous, angry Beppe Grillo. Can that three-way split be resolved? These are crucial questions as the vote for the the presidency looms a few scant weeks away.

ROME -

Just one month after Italy's national general elections, Pier Luigi Bersani, leader of the Partito



Democratico (PD), is clambering up a political Mount Everest whose peak is completely shrouded in the clouds, even as time is running out during what are crucial days. Charged last week by President Giorgio Napolitano to begin testing the ground for creation of a new government, Bersani was given a fuzzy assignment which translates more or less into pre-commission (pre-incarico).

In essence Bersani is being asked to resolve the three-way split that pits the PD against both the rightist Liberty Party (PdL) of former Premier Silvio Berlusconi and the forces of the self-righteously angry Beppe Grillo. Although in meetings Monday with trade union leaders, Bersani was told the country needs a government "at all costs," many here still see Bersani's efforts to hammer out an agreement as futile, and continue to lobby for early elections. Should Bersani fail in these coming days, Napolitano may decide to send the country to the polls once more.

But not everyone wants this. In Bersani's camp (and not only his), many consider the prospect of new elections a mistake because they cannot guarantee a political solution satisfactory to Italians and to their European partners. New elections, even if under a much-needed revised election law, could take place as early as June. They come, however, with a risk of drawing more anti-establishment votes into the deep well of the endlessly truculent Grillo, who has just dismissed critical comments on his blog site as "digital shit" (merda digitale). Grillo, incidentally, also irritated many last week when, following his visit to President Napolitano at the Quirinal Palace, his driver went on an "urban slalom" (as one reporter described it) speeding through a series of red lights and then careening into a lane solely for buses and taxis.

Meanwhile, speaking in piazzas, Berlusconi is demanding the presidency for himself when Napolitano steps down April 15. There are of course alternative candidates. Most importantly, as Ezio Mauro, editor of *La Repubblica*, points out, any new government must also reflect the outcome of consultations over election of a new president.

In this political slalom, then, what is Bersani to do? In past weeks he has made timid advances to both Grillo and to Berlusconi. Grillo rejects the advances tout court but Berlusconi remains vaguely possibilist; one suggestion was to have a Bersani ticket jointly with Berlusconi's number two in the party, Angelino Alfano. Needless to say this is anathema to most in the PD. However, even there small but significant signals, attributed rightly or wrongly to Bersani's junior challenger Matteo Renzi, suggest that in the interest of the nation some form of entente with Berlusconi's official reviled PdL are not being entirely dismissed. "To propose an agreement with Berlusconi means bringing elections closer," protests Piero Fassina, an elder statesman of the PD.

Contrary to what was reported in the earlier post-election weeks, in the definitive count Bersani holds the majority of votes in absolute with 8,932,615, which includes overseas ballots. This figure flies in the face of Grillo, who continues to claim that his party, with 8,784,499 votes, is the country's largest; the overseas count is dismissed because, Grillo's backers claim without documentation, the vote outside Italy was fiddled.

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