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The Third Republic in Italy: the last season of an ungovernable democracy?

Italian press, political actors, ordinary citizens, and many intellectuals in Italy insist on considering the beginning of the present Legislature, as a turning point in the history of the country, and name it “Terza Repubblica” (the Third Republic). The label is problematic at least from a formal point of view: in fact, there is neither a new Constitution nor any structural modification of it. However, as a matter of facts, the Italian political arena has been transformed enough during the last decades to partially justify the use of such a label.

After telling you a brief history of Italian Republics in order to make you more comfortable with some political passages, I will suggest you that Tomasi di Lampedusa’s well-know quotation from the *Leopard*: “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change” might be still valid in this new season of the ungovernable Italian democracy.

The First Republic started in 1946, when an institutional referendum abolished the monarchy, and lasted until 1994, ruled by a perfect proportional system of representance. The Christian Democratic Party remained in control for most of the time with the Communist Party offering a stiff opposition. During the 1960s the Socialist Party joined Christian Democratic Party in governing the country. In the 1980s, Italy was governed by the so called Pentapartito (a coalition of five parties, which included Christian Democracy, two social-democratic parties, the liberal party and the republican party). Please, keep in mind that liberal party and republican party never attested their performance above around 2-4 %.

Italy's governments have always been rather unstable during the First Republic: Prime Ministers and their governments came and went rapidly as loyalties shifted and priorities changed. Governments last 11 months on average. Reasons were explained by Giorgio Galli (1966) who introduced the concept of *imperfect bipartitism*: Christian Democracy and Communist Party were dominant, but unable to take turns in government. The mechanism was reinforced by a general cultural tendency, which was a peculiar Italian phenomenon, Catholic Communism: the whole of those thinkers and politicians who, despite being declared Catholic, opt for a political and programmatic choice close to the communist positions, accepting, but not completely adhering to, a large part of Marxist thought. With a mainly pejorative meaning, detractors used the term to indicate the process of rapprochement between the Communist Party and Christian Democracy in the 1970s. Giovanni Sartori (1976) clarified that in that peculiar Italian situation, a *polarized pluralism* emerged: a multi-party political

system which was dysfunctional because it did not allow moderate or moderate-leaning left-wing or right-wing parties to develop.

A major shake-up occurred in early 1990s, the *Mani Pulite* or 'clean hands', a nationwide judicial investigation team, cast lights on *Tangentopoli*, loosely translated as 'bribesville,' which exposed wide governmental corruption, strong Mafia influence, and an extreme national debt. 5,000 public figures fell under suspicion; more than half of the members of the Parliament were indicted; more than 400 city and town councils were dissolved because of corruption charges. The estimated value of bribes paid annually in the 1980s by Italian and foreign companies bidding for large government contracts reached 4 billion dollars. The major political parties eventually had to dissolve and the Second Republic emerged, promising to be completely different from the previous one. The promise was not kept: Italy is still one of the most corrupted country, Mafia-style still rules, public debt is 132% out of GDP.

During the Second Republic (1994-2018), some new actors appeared in the political arena and started the process of erosion of traditional parties which has dramatically emerged lately. Berlusconi burst on the political arena: his Forza Italia (Go Italy) party sprang up around his extensive media empire, and his leadership was reinforced by his own friends plus many refugees and opportunists from the ruins of the First Republic. Among his allies, the Northern League, at that time a secessionist, and anti-southern movement, today much more focused in screaming out Europe and immigrants. Despite unable to build up a coesive moderate party capable to survive beyond his own leadership, Berlusconi's unlikely coalition managed to form four governments, including the longest in the history of the republic (2008 - 2011). On the oppsite side, in the center-left, the bulk of the former Communist Party leadership became the core of an alliance that ran from parts of the far left to former left-wing Christian Democrats as well as moderates repelled by Berlusconi's coalition. Here, too, efforts to turn a heterogeneous alliance into something more permanent were not just unsuccessful, but marked by constant infighting, including a number of splits.

Yet the goal of producing a bipolarism, although an artificially-sustained bipolarism, a *destructured bipolarism*, as it has been labeled by Pasquino (2014) – also called 'quasi bipolarism'- between governments of the center-right and center-left, able to alternate in power without undue trauma, had apparently been achieved. Unfortunately, it was a 'bipolar illusion' that was called into question and definitively blew apart during the last five years, when a heterogeneous 'Grand Coalition', formed by the Democratic Party and Berlusconi's party, ruled the the country. Meanwhile, the Five Stars Movement, which got 25% of votes in 2013 general election, played as opposition.

During Great Coalition, Matteo Renzi got the leadership of the Democratic Party and therefore the prime minister's office. An excess of self-promotion and self-confidence cost him his position as prime minister. The immediate cause of his resignation was the rejection, in December 2016, of a number of modifications to the Italian Constitution, by a popular referendum, which actually became a referendum on him. Voters were asked to endorse a proposed reform, approved by Parliament a few months earlier, of the second part of the Italian Constitution. It was a complex text, in which two main themes can be identified. First, an effort to overcome bicameralism, by reducing the Senate into a representative chamber of local institutions. Second, a redefinition of the division of powers

between local and central institutions (in favour of the latter). A Yes vote would have potentially led to a majoritarian – and *de facto* presidential – democracy, inaugurating Italy’s ‘Third Republic’.

The referendum failed; Renzi resigned; President Mattarella appointed the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paolo Gentiloni, as Prime Minister; the birth of the ‘Third Republic’ was postponed and became a *leitmotiv* of the controversial, anti-establishment, euroskeptical, anti-freetrade, and populist Five Stars Movement, which, in the meanwhile, had dramatically grew up. Social media and web technology deliver its message to a specific target of Italians frustrated with austerity, the persistence of economic crisis, and anti-immigrant irritation, which, according to their propaganda, directly and totally came from Bruxelles.

As Urbinati claims in her book *The Age of Populism* the country had been “split in two” between traditional establishment voters on the right and left (either in Berlusconi’s party or in the Democratic Party), and everyone else. Unfortunetely, everyone else turned out to be the majority: in a framework of substantial uncertainty over the country’s political trajectory, general election, which took place last March, handed a majority of votes to Five Stars Movement (32%). Berlusconi’s Forza Italia as well as the Democratic Party reached out their historical minimum (14%; and 18% respectively), while the far-right League significantly increased (17%).

After 88 days of impasses and negotiations, a coalition of government was formed on early June. The two populist, anti-system and anti-establishment parties, Five Stars Movement and the League officially started the Third Republic in the eurozone’s third-largest economy. Bickerton and Accetti (2018) recently have labeled this combination of populism, anti-establishment and anti-system (being establishment and system the traditional political parties and the press) with a paradoxical-sounding term, *techno-populism*. Technocracy and populism in fact, are both against pluralism, and against the traditional politics, in the sense that they both seek to bypass the democratic representative process by assuming that, for every challenge, there is always one right answer given by either the expert elite (technocracy), or by the “will of people” (populism). Just a very brief insight around the fallacious notion of ‘people’. Who is it? Those who voted for Five Stars? For the League? By the way, the two did not run together. League run in a coalition with Berlusconi, which split apart after the results of general election. For the present opposition? In every group there are millions of voters. However, the present government self-proclaims to speak for the ‘people’ against professional politicians and financial elite, whose agenda is aimed to oppress the people in order to keep their privileges. In spite of their passionate rethoric, as Cassese recently wrote, the prime minister of the Five Stars-League government, as well as the the ministers of finance, foreign affairs and European relations are all unelected members of the hateful etile, more specifically, university professors. Furthermore, the formation government has followed the same old logic of power-partition; a tax cut for rich people and a basic income for unemployed have been promised; Prime Minister’s acceptance speech contained only a few words about public debt, nothing about Mafia and Italian spoil system. If this is a populist revolution, the revolutionaries look suspiciously establishment, and, with such a premise, the Third Republic does not look so much different from the previous two.

Seems that Tomasi is still right. Why? Among many reasons, I would suggest the role of a missing component of the Italian ungovernable democracy: the absence of an authentical liberal party, able to

promote economic liberalism and a well-balanced political competition, grounded on what Luigi Einaudi named “a principle of liberty as responsibility”. For different reasons, Christian Democracy failed during the First Republic, and Democratic Party as well as Berlusconi failed during the Second Republic. Given the populist nature of the present government I have a feeling things will not change. A genuine liberal party in Italy never emerged for many reasons. Let me just mention three of them, which maybe are valid also for non-Italians. First, as Vilfredo Pareto claimed, Italians’ education on the relationship between economic matters and the role of the State had always been so poor that, at a first stage, it leads to a huge empowerment of the political class, and therefore, to the decline of the country, being elites bound to fail in self-modernization. Second, Italians had always struggled with understanding that a free democracy is a fragile compromise between different groups with different interests to combine in a less traumatic possible way, it is not a soccer championship with teams supported by hooligans. Third, Italians had never learnt that a free democracy is grounded on the limits of government; they still believe in a vague paternalistic tendency of governants –no matter whether classical politicians, or technocratic experts, or populist leaders- aimed to solve everything that goes wrong. A tendency that -by the way - would be either illusional or very dangerous.

I am not able to make any prevision about the destiny of this government and, much more important, of my country and of European Union, but I am sure that the dawn of the Italian Third Republic does not bode well.