

The Momentum of Populism: The Fall of Italy's "Demolition Man"

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Global Research, December 10, 2016

Region: [Europe](#)

Demagogic in parts, simply irreverent in others, the populist wave that seized the White House last month continues to inflict its casualties across the Atlantic. The Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, known as Il Rottamatore or Demolition Man, had to fall on his sword after yet another miscalculation by the necromancy of polling. As with Brexit, the establishment forces were left reeling in indignation and, more often than not, self-denial.

Renzi had simply been too greedy. His attempt centred on hobbling the Senate on the heels of changing the electoral law regarding the Chamber of Deputies. The consequence of attaining both these measures would have been a concentration of power in the prime minister's office.

The terror for eurozone backers at Renzi's loss by a 20 point margin was spine tingling. Spain's Mariano Rajoy told the *Wall Street Journal* of his disbelief. "We don't know who is going to be there, if there's going to be an election, what law they'll apply." [1]

The referendum result, and the defeat of Renzi, does open the door in an even wider sense to the highly unconventional Beppe Grillo of the Five Star Movement (M5S). Created by comedian Grillo and the late web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio in 2009, the movement became something of a virtual meeting place for the indignant.

Social media and blogging converged with the use of such sites as Meetup.com. The sparks created by these interactions gradually saw the fielding of candidates and the gaining of momentum such that in 2013, the M5S became the second most voted party in Italy.

The Italian shock effectively paves the way for more than a stern rebuke against the politics of the eurozone. It also brings into play the chances of another exit, even though that would require a constitutional revision.

Such triumphs, while unsettling to those in the traditional power base, still see tradition as ultimately reasserting itself. But the defeat of the referendum on the Senate was as much a defence of tradition as anything else: voters from across the spectrum were rightly suspicious that Renzi had wanted too much. The lessons learnt here, as in other instances, are different. Not all who rocked the boat on December 4 wished to see the European project wither into oblivion. The debate, ever more urgent, is what that project entails, and what institutions are needed to achieve it.

Rajoy, for instance, has nailed his colours to the mast of certainty while terming the Italian situation a "mess". The flu contracted in Britain and Italy, he surmised, would not spread to disable an already delicate Europe. Populism would be

contained. France and Germany would resist the seizure of novelty.

Marine Le Pen of France's Front National naturally begs to differ. She nurses dreams of "Frexit," an unravelling of the eurozone from the centre. Renzi's defeat was another notch on that particular belt. "The Italians have disavowed the EU and Renzi. We must listen to this thirst for freedom of nations."

Rajoy's beliefs are near comical, given that they are being expressed before an already rapidly moving avalanche. He certainly believes political parties of the status quo can talk themselves out of the mess that has effectively estranged them from the voting public.

"If traditional political parties defend themselves with the same energy and good arguments as opponents of the system do, then things will stabilise." This all boiled down to explaining "what positive things the big European parties have done."

Even the political observers, such as James Newell of the University of Salford, have little confidence in the sustainability of the populist project. The eclectic base of such parties as M5S doubles as both a strength and weakness.

A vote for the M5S is a straightforward protest vote. Despite being united in their desire to shake up the status quo, M5S activists and supporters are divided across a whole range of issues separating left and right. (The Conversation, Dec 1).[2]

Certainly, Grillo's dilemmas are genuine. A party of direct democracy that supposedly does much to re-enfranchise the voting base doesn't sit well with the card carrying model of party discipline. The latter has certainly been a point Grillo has tried to ram home. It has precipitated the usual reaction: clashes and disagreements, and defections to the tune of 17 percent in the Chamber of Deputies since the 2013 election.

No one model of explanation will do here. The populist parties in Italy, as they have shown in other parts of Europe, are bothering the forces of the establishment who merely wish to ride out the storm. But to do so will take more than a technique of comfortable argument proposed by Rajoy.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/741622/Spanish-prime-minister-Mariano-Rajoy-Italy-referendum-populism-movement>

[2] <http://theconversation.com/what-is-italys-five-star-movement-69596>

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