Italy's new left-right government: not the 'normalisation' of the country's politics as yet...

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On 30 April, more than two months after the general election, a new government was finally able to start work in Italy following a pact between Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right Popolo della Libertà and the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD), of which the newly appointed prime minister, Enrico Letta, is a prominent member.

Besides being a 'forced marriage' between opposites, this is also a 'coalition of the losers', since neither the PD nor the PDL are able to command a majority in Parliament with closer allies (although the PD does control one of the chambers).

Berlusconi was an advocate of this solution as soon as it became clear his party had come third. However, the PD initially rejected the idea and made an unsuccessful attempt to form a minority government with backing from the recently formed 'Five Star Movement' (M5S), which came second in the election.

In recent days some features of the Letta government have received much coverage by the international media, from the relatively young age of the new ministers, at least by Italian standards, to the presence of a larger cohort of women than in the past. However, the most interesting details concern Letta's own biography.

Letta is a moderate member of the PD and, even more importantly in a country in which personal relationships remain crucial to political careers, the nephew of Gianni Letta – Berlusconi's former chief of staff and close collaborator. Therefore, no-one seems better qualified to mark the beginning of a 'new era' characterised by dialogue between left and right. But despite the prime minister's rhetoric and Berlusconi's attempts to restyle himself as a statesman ready to compromise, the chances of such a new era taking hold in Italy are almost non-existent.

The main reason for this is that Berlusconi appears unwilling to do anything at all about his continuous clashes with the judiciary and other conflicts of interest – like being leader of the largest party of the right and the owner of countless media and publishing outlets. Such incidents have turned him into the most divisive figure of post-war Italy, and a leader the likes of which no other advanced Western democracy has ever seen.

The anomaly that Berlusconi represents has eroded fundamental principles such as the separation of powers and the equality of all citizens before the law, to such an extent that any talk of a 'normalisation' of the relationship between the two opposing camps sound like wishful thinking.

The PD's identity and objectives remain fuzzy but giving Berlusconi full legitimisation could bring with it electoral annihilation at the next election – 94 per cent of PD's voters say they distrust the former prime minister.

Therefore, rather than being about to witness the 'pacification' of Italy that Berlusconi now advocates, in the next few months we are more likely to see a weak government that tries to survive, the strings of which will be pulled by the PDL's leader. Indeed, new ministers had barely been sworn in before Berlusconi threatened to bring down the executive unless it agreed to abolish a recently introduced property tax.

Having been declared 'finished' by the international media several times in the past (most recently, after he was forced to step down as prime minister in 2011), and having lost the support of half of his electorate in the most recent election of 2013, Berlusconi has again managed to position himself firmly at the centre of Italian politics. With support for his party now recovering fast, and with his opponents of the PD being as divided as ever, the media entrepreneur turned politician is definitely ready to fight another day.

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