

The endless 'return' of Silvio Berlusconi: what does it say about his party and can he win again?

Berlusconi seeking a return to power

Dr Daniele Albertazzi

In recent days the Italian PM Mario Monti announced that he would step down as soon as his 2013 budget was passed, opening the way to national elections as early as next February.

Monti's 'technocratic government' had relied on the parliamentary support of the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD), Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right party Popolo della Libertà (PDL) and others. Monti's decision to leave was therefore inevitable; since the PDL had recently made clear that the experience of his government had come to an end. Moreover, in the last few days we have also learned that Berlusconi will be the PDL's candidate for PM in the forthcoming election. The media entrepreneur made this announcement just as his party was allegedly gearing up for primary elections through which it had said it would select its candidate for the premiership. Such elections are obviously no longer on the cards.

Whatever Berlusconi's motives - many will assume that he is seeking power again in order to be able to pass legislation that can help him in one of his trials, something he has done several times before - his move raises two interesting questions. The first, which interests mainly those who follow Italian politics closely, is: 'what kind of party is Berlusconi's party?', while the second, i.e. 'can he really win again?', concerns a wider constituency of European leaders, journalists and ordinary citizens who wonder what the future holds for the Euro and the European project.

I will deal with the first question first. The events of the last week evidently show that the PDL remains very much Berlusconi's 'personal' party; put simply, the party 'belongs' to him, to do as he pleases. As two PDL representatives interviewed for research purposes openly admitted not long ago: "The PDL is Berlusconi's party. Berlusconi says what has to be done... anyone who does not agree with Berlusconi's leadership is out". This remains true today as the sudden 'disappearance' of the PDL's primary elections clearly demonstrates. While this model might not be the most democratic, according to many within the PDL, it has worked. We will never know how successful more democratic centre-right parties would have been in Italy's recent history. However, Berlusconi's top-down, centralized, personal parties, lacking rootedness at the local level and communicating through the national media (the PDL today, and Forza Italia before it) have at times been very effective electoral machines.

This takes us to the second question: 'can Berlusconi win again?' Can he win even this time, despite the scandals, the trials in which he stands accused of various crimes and, importantly, his lamentable record in stewarding the Italian economy over the last decade?

The short answer is that a victory by Berlusconi in February is very unlikely. Yes, he was wrongly pronounced 'dead' many times before by the international media, starting shortly after the collapse of his first government in 1994, and has been able to stage several comebacks in the past. Besides, he will certainly do his very best, and make full use of his financial and media capabilities, as the campaign unfolds. However, winning the next national election outright would truly be one of those miracles Berlusconi has often said he can perform.

Surveys show his opponents of the PD enjoying the support of 38% of the electorate, and the PDL stuck at 18%. Furthermore, trust in Berlusconi as a leader (still at 35% per cent in 2005, just a few months before he narrowly lost to the centre-left) is now no higher than 20% (source: Demos). Managing to turn this around thus appears very difficult. However, two and a half months can be a long time in politics. This is particularly true if Berlusconi can manage to fully exploit three factors that may have a considerable impact on the forthcoming election:

Firstly, almost 50% of voters are still undecided, according to a survey commissioned by the left-wing newspaper l'Unità. There is evidence that before the 2006 election, which Berlusconi was expected to lose by a large margin and only lost narrowly, the very effective campaign he ran persuaded an extensive number of undecided voters to vote for him. Could he do this again?

Secondly, no-one can predict how successful a new party called 'Five Star Movement', running on an anti-party, anti-corruption and anti-EU platform, will be on the day of the election. The Five Star Movement did very well in recent local elections and up to 16% of the electorate now say that they will vote for it. But how many people will really do so once they have entered the electoral booth is anyone's guess, given the Italian electorate's well rooted propensity for bipolar politics and for shunning third parties in national elections. An additional interesting question is whether, as the campaign unfolds, the Five Star Movement can eat further into the centre-left's support, thus weakening it before the vote. This may have a serious impact on the overall results.

Thirdly, although Monti may still be highly regarded in Italy, there is widespread and widening dissatisfaction with the austerity measures passed by him and the effect of the government's policies on people's disposable incomes. If Berlusconi plays his cards well, he will be able to depict the centre-left as 'the coalition of Mario Monti', claiming that his opponents have been fully in favour of higher taxes and painful austerity measures (while he was waiting on the sideline for about a year). The PDL's leader is already arguing that the 'government of technocrats' has worsened Italy's economic situation -and his pre-electoral campaigns have been game changers before. Indeed, Italy's economic and social situation is very worrying, as the number of families reporting serious financial difficulties is now as high as 30% (it was 16% a year ago), while the country's economy has shrunk throughout 2011, and unemployment has soared.

It is unlikely that all this will be enough for Berlusconi to win outright, as I have said. But it may be sufficient to deprive the centre-left of a solid majority (especially given that the current electoral law can produce different majorities in the two Parliamentary chambers), thereby turning a future centre-left government into a weak and short lived one. A weak government of whatever political leaning would not be good news for Italy, nor for the rest of Europe. But it would mean that Berlusconi could, once again, stay in the game.

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