Italy votes: a Greek tragedy in Magna Grecia

On 24 and 25 February 2013, 31 millions Italians went to the polls to elect the successor of the non-elected technocratic government led by the Eurocrat Mario Monti. Or at least this is what they thought. The ballots in fact gave no certainty about the winner. Only the loser is certain: Italy.

According to election data, the centre-left coalition has about 124,000 more votes than the centre-right coalition in the lower chamber (Camera). Therefore, according to the electoral system (named ‘Porcellum’-pig, by its inventor Roberto Calderoli of the Northern League, a Berlusconi ally), the centre-left coalition gained 55% of the seats.

In the higher chamber (Senato) the story is different but at the same time very similar. In short it is a paradox, as are many other aspects of the country. On a national average, the centre-left coalition still has about 200,000 more votes than the centre-right coalition, but it gained only 113 seats as opposed to 116 of the centre-right in the Senate. This is due to the fact that in the Senate seats are attributed on a regional basis and the centre-right coalition gained more votes in the big regions where more were seats are given to the first coalition/party.

The result is one of two peer chambers (the Camera and Senato have the same functions) with two different majorities: meaning, full ungovernability. The most normal and, at the same time, the most unlikely option (another one of Italy’s paradoxes) would be a government led by the centre-left leader Pier Luigi Bersani with the external support of the MoVimento 5 Stelle (MoVement 5 Stars). The now popular movement founded and funded by the always populist comedian Beppe Grillo only two years ago has suddenly become the first party in the country. But from the heyday of the Movement, the V-day (where V stands for the F of the word ‘fu*k’) clearly stated that once in Parliament it would be the warden of legality, not the supporter of any government. And so it keeps saying.
In all this, the honourable Professor Monti, the saviour of Italy, disappeared in the fog of the political contest with his coalition obtaining only some 10% of the vote. As a result, it has a totally non-influential presence in the Parliament.

So what do these results tell us about Italy?

Certainly once again, like in 1994 and 2006 when the Italian centre-right was at its lowest peak of credibility and popularity, the centre-left in 2013 has not been able to win an election that all the pollsters assumed it would win. Silvio Berlusconi’s early fall in October 2011 and Monti’s harsh austerity measures throughout 2012 convinced the Democrats (of the Italy. Common Good coalition led by Bersani) that there was no need to promote a different but feasible perspective for Italy. Instead, they simply thought that presenting themselves as serious, in opposition to Mr. B., and fair, in contrast to the Eurocrat professor, would have been enough. They were clearly wrong.

Another certainty is that Berlusconi is a man never out of fashion for the Italian style. His party was given between 10-12% only a month before the election while it actually ended up with 22% the final tally (over 7 million votes). He decided to take the lead of the campaign once again, resuming refrained but always appealing slogans (such as lifting taxes on housing property), bringing to his AC Milan football club the footballer Mario Balotelli (Italy’s national hero at the 2012 European Championship against the much hated German side), and starting a carpet-bombing media appearance. Like a conjurer, his comeback was assured. As a result, his old grumpy girlfriend, the Italian population, is back into his arms – not to the point to let him walk her to the altar, but surely enough to convince her not to marry someone else.

It is also certainly a fact that the populist comedian Beppe Grillo is the man that will somehow decide the sort of the country. The bad news is that he does not want to. His MoVimento 5 Stelle strongly supports the importance of direct democracy through the internet in order to completely get rid of the entire Italian political elite, to exit the Eurozone, and to impose a drastic revision of a European Union it sees as founded on the power of the ECB (European Central Bank), the big European financial corporations, and industrial and economic groups. All these arguments are not new, neither in Italy nor in the rest of Europe. In spite all aforementioned positions, during the electoral campaign the lack of democracy within the MoVement and Grillo’s authoritarianism were soundly denounced by the centre-left coalition. In fact, Bersani who is now asking for Grillo’s support in forming a coalition government defined him, inter alia, nothing less than a ‘fascist of the web’, that is ‘worst than Lenin’, and a ‘fifth column of Berlusconi’.

However, despite all these certainties, Italy’s future cannot be more uncertain.

Saying that Italy has elected ‘two clowns’, as an important European political figure has promptly commented, is perhaps misplaced for an official statement. However, it could be fair to argue that Italy’s population put the destiny of the country in the hands of a comedian that does not want to become a politician; into those of a politician that certainly is not smiling for his political performance; and in the hands of a tycoon that behaves like a
comedian to become a politician. What comes out of this *ménage-à-trois* will certainly be another of Italy’s paradoxes.