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## ITALIAN PRESIDENT SERGIO MATTARELLA CALLS FOR 'NEUTRAL GOVERNMENT'

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Italy's president says the country will need to hold a fresh vote if bickering political parties cannot work together. Negotiations to form a government have been deadlocked since an inconclusive election in March.

Italian President Sergio Mattarella issued a stern warning on Monday amid failing government-building talks and proposed that a "neutral" administration be formed to lead the country until December.

Mattarella called on the bickering parties to show "responsibility" and support his currently unnamed government, adding that a new vote would have to be held if such an administration failed to find the necessary backing in parliament.

### **How the political crisis began**

An Italian election on March 4 resulted in a hung parliament after none of the country's political forces managed to clear the 40-percent hurdle necessary to govern.

The 5-Star Movement (M5S) emerged as the largest single party with 32 percent of the vote, but has struggled to put together a coalition with its rivals.

Last Easter, in an attempt to soften his image as he eyed a return to politics, Berlusconi took part in an ad promoting vegetarianism that featured him snuggling lambs in soft lighting overlaid with easy listening music. Although Berlusconi is barred from seeking office for another year due to a fraud conviction, a bloc led by his Forza Italia party has been polling strongly.

### **'No faith' in president's proposal**

"Let the parties decide of their own free will if they should give full powers to a government ... or else new elections [should be held] immediately in the month of July or the autumn," Mattarella said in a televised statement.

In a tweet, the leader of the 5-Star Movement, Luigi Di Maio said: "[We have] No faith in a "neutral" government, which is synonymous with a government of technocrats. We are going to vote in July."

Forza Italia, the party led by former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, cautioned against rushing towards an early election: "We are not afraid of an election, but a summer [vote] does not help turnout. Autumn is better."

Acting leader of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) Maurizio Martina praised Mattarella's plan: "We hope that it's heard by all political forces. The PD will not fall short in its support for his initiative."

Why has there been a struggle to form a coalition government? The left-wing M5S offered to form a coalition with the far-right League, but the League has refused to ditch its alliance with Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which M5S will not cooperate with. The possibility of a M5S coalition with the PD was also ruled out last week when the PD's national leadership voted against pursuing any such alliance.

What would the neutral government do? The president said the neutral government would be given the task of drawing up a 2019 budget to stave off the threat of an automatic increase in sales taxes that would be triggered if the country's deficit floundered. He said the administration would also help Italy stick to its international obligations, including participating in a June European Council meeting. The government would then dissolve at the end of the year ahead of elections planned for early 2019.

law,nm/se (AP, dpa)

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