
DISMISS ITALY'S SALVINI AT YOUR PERIL

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Italian politics is never short of drama, and the past few weeks have been no exception.

Since last year, Italy had been governed by an improbable alliance between the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S), led by Luigi di Maio, and the far-right Lega party, led by firebrand Matteo Salvini.

For fourteen months the two leaders – both vested with the title of deputy prime minister – barely held together a coalition that has been fraught with difficulties from the get-go, owing to the fundamentally incompatible stances of their parties.

The only real surprise is that the alliance lasted so long.

In the end it was Salvini that brought the government tumbling down, withdrawing his support for the coalition and tabling a motion of no confidence in the non-partisan prime minister Giuseppe Conte.

The latter duly resigned, and the stage was set for a general election.

Salvini's strategy had been clear from the start. Emboldened by his party's strong showing in opinion polls, and victory in the May European elections, Salvini was no longer content with a part-time role in the administration.

He no longer needed his coalition partners, or a figurehead prime minister.

He himself could finally take the reins and implement his program unimpeded. No more need for compromise. No need for dilution. "Il Capitano" [the Captain] could finally complete his political ascent and be coronated prime minister.

Twist in the tale

Only that's not how it panned out. For Salvini hadn't counted on there being another twist in the tale.

He failed to give due consideration to the possibility that his erstwhile partners, M5S, could entertain the idea of forming an unlikely alliance with their staunch rivals at the centre-left Democratic Party (PD). And that's exactly what happened.

Subsequent discussions between the parties revealed enough common ground for a tentative alliance.

And adding insult to injury for Salvini, it was agreed that Conte – who had launched a stinging attack on Salvini upon resigning – be reinstated as prime minister.

The deal was put to M5S's membership through its online platform, and they dutifully applied the seal of approval.

Salvini's gamble had backfired spectacularly. He had been shut out of government and dispelled to the opposition benches.

But as he now retreats to lick his wounds, there will be one thing only on his mind: a glorious comeback. A 21st century March on Rome (through democratic means).

And in all likelihood, all he would have to do is sit back and await his turn, as the temporary Five Star-Democratic Party tie up erodes gradually.

The alliance between the two longstanding foes has looked dysfunctional from the start with clear fissures apparent from early in the negotiations.

Their loose 26-point joint programme will almost certainly be unable to compensate for the plethora of disagreements that will inevitably surface once they get down to the business of government.

All the while, Salvini will be on a war footing, whipping up a blizzard across the land in preparation for the inescapable general election. And that's where Salvini will flourish.

Social media giant

Over the past year in government, he has monopolised the public debate with his anti-migrant rhetoric, belligerent attitude towards Brussels, and extensive social media following, drowning out his political opponents in the process.

His zero-tolerance approach to irregular migration, including a ban on migrant-rescuing NGO vessels docking in Italian ports, has won him many supporters who feel disillusioned by European reticence to share the migration burden.

And as the new government begins to unpick his hard-line policies and move towards a more conciliatory relationship with the EU, expect public anger to grow and for Salvini to duly capitalise on it.

The symptoms that have led in the jump in Salvini's popularity – migrant influx, national security threats, economic malaise – show no sign of abating.

And if there's one certainty in Italian politics, it's that stable governments are not the order of the

day. Much less when they're composed of two sworn enemies.

On that basis, Salvini will be making a return sooner rather than later. And this time it could well be as prime minister, at the head of a hard-right coalition with the neo-fascist Brothers of Italy party.

October local elections will give an early indication of the impact the saga has had on the Lega vote, with opinion polls currently giving them as much as a 13 point lead at 33 percent. That's only likely to increase as the government fumbles.

Salvini's recent gambit may have failed but dismiss him at your peril – in his own words "From today you will find me even more pissed off and determined. I will go from town to town and we will take this country back".

Author bio

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