

Avalanche for Renzi and for Democracy

Judith Harris (December 09, 2013)



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ROME - Given the disaffection in the Italian electorate, not a single pundit dared to predict that two million people would turn out for Sunday's Partito Democratico (PD) primaries to elect a new general secretary. So guess what: a stunningly large number, almost three million, defied chill weather and Christmas shopping traffic jams to stand in line to vote in the 8,400 impromptu polling stations set up by volunteers all over Italy. As predicted, Matteo Renzi, the 38-year-old, fast-talking mayor of Florence since 2009, won the three-way race, but here too the surprise was that he claimed the



support of over two out of three voters, or, with 1.7 million votes to his credit, almost 70%. It was, as the media here are saying, "an avalanche," "a tsunami."

Already today Renzi has taken the party reins from general secretary Guglielmo Epiphani, who has been babysitting the fragmented since last February, and this afternoon announced his new group of supporters. Renzi's chief rival candidate Gianni Cuperlo, who represented the past twenty-years of continuity of the PD and its deeper origins in the old Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), claimed only 18.2%. With 13.4%, the younger PD outsider-intellectual, Pippo Civati, fared almost as well. Support for both came primarily in the North of Italy.

But there are also two other winners. The first and most important is Italian democracy itself. The sheer size of the turnout showed that, however frustrated and disappointed the electorate, vast numbers still believe enough in the system to take the time to vote. This is important in a nation whose democratic traditions date back little more than half a century.

The third victory is that this is at the very least a harbinger of generational change. Renzi's triumph turns the party's back to the old nomenclature and, by handing power over to a new generation of under-forties, launches the reconstruction of a non-ideological progressive party on the Italian left. "It's up to a new generation now," Renzi said in his acceptance speech, "and this time the changes will be real."

These real change are afoot not only in the PD. By coincidence, more or less, the ever truculent Northern League, whose newest battle is to have the Veneto Region secede from Italy, also held an all-party election Sunday in which its founding father, Umberto Bossi, was trounced by a younger rival, Matteo Salvini, 40. Bossi, who has suffered a stroke, has been in some disgrace for financial scandals and for his son's payment of E230,000 (\$315,000) for a university degree from Albania, necessary in order to be given a well-paid job in the local regional bureaucracy. (That financial skullduggery, incidentally, has infuriated and mortified Albanian educational authorities.) Salvini is, to put it mildly, eccentric; one of his more bizarre proposals, dating from a campaign in Milan in 2009, was to have subway coaches reserved for the exclusive use of Milanese citizens and women - that is, where immigrants could not ride.

Reaction in the international press was swift, and the Renzi crowd yesterday was boasting at all the world media masters who were phoning him but not being received. For the Wall Street Journal Renzi is the new star of the Italian left. Reuters: "a charismatic" leader but one who is "brash." In addition, he has come to victory on an anti-establishment ticket but he is now the establishment, as Mattia Guidi has pointed out in the on-line version of the Policy Network. If nothing else he will extract a high price from Letta for loyalty - and it is no secret that Renzi's next goal is, himself, to become prime minister.

As the outgoing secretary Epiphani commented pointedly, Renzi's victory is "an unequivocal signal that he will have a strong democratic mandate and great responsibility." This raises the very serious question of what now - what of his relations with PD Premier Enrico Letta? Letta was careful not to choose among the trio of candidates and, when Renzi trumped the other two, Letta promised the two would "work together in a team spirit that will be fruitful and useful to the country and to the center-left." However, Renzi is on record saying that he will not tolerate the "inciucio" (the word for piglets huddled together beneath the belly of the sow). The piglets in question are the coalition government headed by Letta, but in which Angelino Alfano, the new head of the Partito della Liberta' (PdL), represents the right wing. But do not expect clarity: not long ago it was Renzi who was winking an eye at Silvio Berlusconi's right wing. And, speaking of Berlusconi and piglets, that former Premier's newest bid is to join forces in some as yet undefined way with Beppe Grillo's ever noisy Movimento Cinque Stelle. "The best is yet to come," Renzi said this morning. Well, maybe, but hold onto your hats - the fat lady has not yet sung.



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