

Still Political Mid-Winter in Italy

Judith Harris (April 14, 2015)



Spring is busting out all over Italy, but the political climate remains deep winter. Premier Matteo Renzi, whose popularity had been robust at almost 40% in January, is watching his once firm grip on politics slip to today's 33%. Meanwhile the stormy problems facing his government – public works, migrants, election rules – would challenge any leader anywhere.

Spring is bursting out all over Italy, but the political climate remains deep winter. Premier [Matteo Renzi](#) [2], whose popularity had been robust at almost 40% in January, is watching his once firm grip on politics slip slowly but surely to today's 33%. At the same time the problems facing his government today would challenge any leader anywhere.

These stormy problems begin with



public works, or their shoddiness. In the Italian South, three major highways have developed such huge cracks that they are shut down, obliging long and time-consuming detours. Two are new roads in Sicily, where the breaches are on the main highways between Palermo and Agrigento, and between Palermo and Catania. In one viaduct, the pillars are tipping over, to the point that [Graziano Del Rio](#). [3] the new Minister for Public Works, suggests demolishing it entirely.

Another viaduct built in the Sixties in quake-risk territory between Salerno and Reggio Calabria is interrupted, while troubles are reported in tunnels still under construction in the area between Umbria and the Marches. Last but not least, at Ostuni in Puglia, 5 sq. m. of ceiling in a newly restored elementary school building crumbled, sending a teacher and two 7-year-old students to hospital.

The good news is that Del Rio, the new Minister of the Infrastructure, is calling a halt to so-called “emergency” large-scale public works, in favor of more urgent and smaller projects, which include, guess what, maintenance. Del Rio, who has been Renzi’s guardian angel and counselor, is an interesting figure – a practicing Catholic, a medical doctor, former mayor of Reggio Emilia and family man with nine children. Among those hailing his approach is Paolo Buzzetti, president of the Italian association of building contractors. “Today more than ever we require carefully-aimed plans,” Buzzetti told the press, “with priority for maintenance and school buildings – simple, clear projects with transparent funding.”

A second major issue Renzi faces is migration. The calmer seas mean that the Mediterranean, which some commentators here are calling “the cemetery,” is now being crossed by dozens if not hundreds of small, overloaded rubber boats filled with desperado migrants from Africa and the war-torn Middle East primarily via the Libyan coast. In just four days some 7,000 migrants flooded onto the Italian shores; 846 arrived at Lampedusa alone during the night April 14 (see photo). For passage they pay up to \$3,000, and only later learn what sort of boat awaits them. According to Franco Venturini, an authoritative commentator for the daily *Corriere della*

Sera, 20,000 Libyans “manage” the camps in which the migrants are awaiting passage.

It is known that, when the wannabe migrants are told to board unseaworthy craft and try to dodge away, the organizers (scafisti) force them to board at gunpoint. In 2014 the figure of those arriving had been around 170,000. Today’s predictions are that between 250,000 and 500,000 are likely to arrive from Syria, Yemen, the Horn of Africa, Irak, Nigeria and elsewhere. How are they to be fed, housed and given health care? No one knows. Nor does anyone know how many ships sank, leaving no survivors, when rescue ships were unable to arrive in time.

Is this a political issue? Indeed it is, with anti-migrant sentiment fueling Matteo Salvini’s [Northern League](#) [4]. In a tweet today Salvini wrote, “If someone wants to welcome them, let him open the doors to his own house!” Salvini had already proposed leaving the migrants aboard their boats on grounds they are responsible for Italy’s economic woes, which include around 40% youth unemployment.

On the political front, tensions within the [Partito Democratico](#) [5] (PD) between Renzi and his party’s left factions, particularly over the election reform bill known as “Italicum,” show no sign of diminishing. This weekend former Italian President [Giorgio Napolitano](#) [6] rapped the knuckles of the left, pointing out that, after months of debate and discussion, it is wasteful to continue to sabotage the Italicum.

But the left factions, including Roberto Speranza’s “Area Riformista,” give no sign of caving in, for they believe that the proposed reform will concentrate too much power in the hands of the government at the expense of the Parliament. As written now, the Italicum curbs the authority of the Senate in order to avoid the time-consuming shuttling of legislation between the two houses of Parliament, with no conclusion, even as its European partners press Italy toward application of the many reform bills in the wings.

The Italicum had originally been supported by [Silvio Berlusconi](#) [7], former premier, who however has withdrawn his backing. Debate on the bill is slated to begin in the Chamber of Deputies April 27, and



some fear that the stalemate may force Renzi into calling a vote of confidence, which, should it fail, lead the country into early elections.

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