

It's "Forward Ho!" for Renzi's Ship

Judith Harris (April 30, 2015)



During the vote on Premier Matteo Renzi's controversial election reform bill nicknamed the "Italicum," the leftist MPs from Nichi Vendola's Sinistra Ecologica Liberta' party wore black mourning bands. But the Renzi bill sailed through the Chamber of Deputies with a comfortable margin, leaving Italy itself more victor than funeral parlor. "Not everyone is on board, but the ship is sailing forward," said an obviously relieved Renzi.

ROME - Matteo Renzi, who is the president of the leading Italian party, Partito Democratico (and who also happens to be premier), sounded like a character from the movie "The Shipping News" Wednesday. When the controversial election reform bill known as the "Italicum" sailed through the Chamber of Deputies with a comfortable margin of, he declared, with obvious relief, that, "I don't have everyone on board, but at this point the ship is sailing forward."



The voting came in three sections. The first, April 29, showed 352 in favor vs. 207 against. The two remaining sections were voted the following day, when again Renzi prevailed with 350 ayes to 193 nays and only one abstention. The next section commanded an even better result, with 357 in favor, just 15 no's and one abstention; the necessary majority was only 179.

None of these three ballots were on the bill itself; given the strong opposition from Renzi's own party's left wing – those he called not “on board” – as a bill, it would most likely have flopped. To save it, Renzi called instead for a vote of confidence in his government, in what was akin to a kangaroo with the election reform bill tucked in its pocket. Earlier Renzi had warned that, “If the Italicum does not pass, I honestly believe the government will fall.” But it did not, and the latest is that a handful of parties opposing the Italicum (and Renzi) are already threatening an abrogative referendum against the reform.

Among these is Nichi Vendola's Sinistra Ecologica Liberta' (SEL), whose MPs wore black arm bands of mourning during the vote. Still, for now Italy itself is more victor than funeral parlor. Without this successful vote the government almost certainly would have collapsed, forcing new elections, not only three years ahead of schedule, but also under today's election rules, so patently unjust that they are nicknamed “The Porcellum” (Pigsty Law) and have been publicly scorned by their very author, Roberto Calderoli. Showing how unpopular is this “Porcellum,” four years ago a petition, circulated in Italy to abolish that law, was signed by such illustrious Italians as author Umberto Eco, political commentator Giovanni Sartori, orchestra conductor Claudio Abbado and scientist Margherita Hack.

The election reform bill is not yet definitive, but must face a final vote in mid-week. The ballot is secret, but few here expect surprises. However, given the opposition to it, a serious issue is whether or not the 38 Partito Democratico (PD) MPs from Renzi's own party who refuse to follow the party line will abstain or actually desert the Parliamentary assembly. Such were tensions between PD majority and minority that in Parliament the two groups did not appear to be on speaking terms, according to reporters observing from the press tribunes. This is political theater, and one of their goals in flaunting their opposition to Renzi's election law is to be rid of Renzi himself.

However, Renzi is somewhat strengthened as party leader by having forced the rebels into the open, where they can be counted. When the dissidents, led by the party's former president Pier Luigi Bersani, urged others among their fellow MPs to vote down the government, they were simply ignored. Renzi's government is also strengthened, in the sense that, when the bill becomes law, he will have dodged early elections and forced through his most significant reform so far of this legislature.

On the down side, although at the moment they deny this, some risk remains that the dissident PD left wing may quit the party altogether, further splintering an electorate already fragmented into tiny parties. Here the new Italicum law (when passed) may discourage some, for its bottom line is that to be represented in Parliament a party must win a minimum of 3% of the vote.

But even passage of the Italicum will not end Renzi's problems, and another serious battle already looms over his proposed renovation (destruction, some might call it) of the Senate. Here Renzi's goal is to stop the back-and-forth, pingpong-bouncing of bills between the two houses of Parliament, which has brought inert governments after countless stalemated legislation. To combat this, Renzi would have the Senate not directly elected, but with a goodly number of representatives from regional governments.

The PD dissidents, who protest that Renzi's governing style is frontal collision rather than political discourse, will probably have more clout over the Senate reform bill, which involves constitutional law. To pass his version, Renzi may be forced embarrassingly to beg for reinforcements from within the ranks of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) party, whose old agreement with Renzi to work together on major reforms, has long since been left at the wayside.



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