

Mario Monti and the Ghibellines: what stance for Italy's future

On February 9, Professor Mario Monti, the new Italian Prime Minister, will meet with President Barack Obama. The gracious White House press-statement announcing the visit was received in Italy as a sign of confidence in the country and its new leader, which led many to say that "Italy is back". In this article, I argue that Monti and his government alone cannot change the country, or the international perception of Italy, unless the political parties change too. I also argue that, just like in 1992-1993, the window of opportunity in which the Monti government is now operating will probably soon close if parties let domestic and self-interest considerations take over on a national imperative for permanent change.

Monti's government was sworn into office on November 16, 2011, at the height of the European economic crises. The way the new government came into being, and the unusual active role played by the Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, sparked a debate among Italian constitutionalists and political scientists about the state and the limits of Italian democracy. Indeed, the abrupt end of Berlusconi's government - the result of the silent and consistent action of a few leading actors, as former Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema mentioned at a recent political rally in Rome¹ - represents the failure of the Italian party system.

What is happening today in Italy recalls the situation faced by Giuliano Amato's first government (June 1992 – April 1993). Just like Monti, Amato was named Prime Minister by the President of the Italian Republic in a moment of economic and political emergency. In both cases, the EU and its monetary system were in the background of the crises; likewise, the need to respond to the EU's requests and to address the crises gave the government an incredible window of opportunity to change the country. In both cases, this opportunity was eagerly seized.

Amato's executive, decoupled from party dictates, took advantage of the situation to implement a number of measures that revived the Italian economy and began a dramatic change of the Italian public administration. Similarly, Monti is taking advantage of the situation to initiate a massive number of reforms. Political parties are in disarray just like in 1992-1993, facing growing public anger over the members of parliament's unjustified privileges (of which, for that matter, they do not seem to be completely aware). While the symbol of the early 1990s was throwing coins at the then Socialist leader Bettino Craxi, today signs with "no politicians welcome" are increasingly hanged at the front doors of restaurants and stores.

However, Amato was unable to finish his program of changes; a government of technocrats headed by Carlo Azelio Ciampo followed (April 1993-April 1994) which then led to the first Berlusconi government (April 1994). The rest, as they say, is history, but almost twenty years later the signs are that Monti's government might face a similar end. Government's proposals were recently rejected in parliament so that the executive started using "confidence votes" to pass laws, traditionally a sign of weakness of Italian governments.

Just like in the Amato case, Monti's government is likely to end in the spring, after less than a year in office. Should the spread on Italian bonds hold at current (lower) levels, and should the Democratic Party win local spring elections as projections show the temptation to go to a vote - before Italians begin feeling the (high) costs of all the cuts and reforms of their budgets in the summer tax season - will be high. Berlusconi's party (PDL) is facing incredible internal centripetal tensions and, even in case of defeat, it might prefer to play the card of a national vote (traditionally PDL scores better in national votes than in local ones, where it suffers PD's territorial organization) before it explodes. Finally, the small aggregation of centrist parties – Monti's main sponsors – may want to cash in

dividends before the tax season, too. In all parties, Catholics are becoming increasingly tempted to re-aggregate after the new vote. Last but not least, though in words everyone blames the current electoral law, party leaders would be very happy to have the opportunity to benefit one last time from the so-called “Porcellum” electoral system because its blocked-lists scheme essentially give party leaders the final decision on whom will seat in Parliament. An early vote – i.e. before the scheduled elections in spring 2013 - would stop the process of reform, enhancing Italy’s lack of credibility.

This leads us to the second point of this article. In Italy, politicians – as well as the media – are generally parochial; they tend to give priority to local over national issues, not to mention European and international issues that are generally barely considered. It is therefore not surprising that many seem sincerely convinced that Monti can restore “Italy’s role in the world” (by himself). Of course, Monti’s undisputed personal respectability has raised the international standard of the country after the *bunga-bunga* low point. But Monti alone – without the full support of the political and administrative class - cannot change the country, let alone its international stance.

Italy's image as an unreliable country is proving hard to forget. There are both historical and more recent grounds for this attitude. Italy is for some still the country that changed sides in both World Wars. This is a historical burden, often underestimated in Italy, that no political class has ever managed to throw off, however excellent their work. This historical perception of Italy is further strengthened in the eyes of international partners when they see Italy's wavering positions in the matter of alliances and policies. For instance, most of the other European countries have networks of alliances that remain stable over time, with homogeneous geographic and socioeconomic interests. On the contrary, for the last twenty years Italy has played the game of shifting alliances, wavering between playing the European honest broker and temptations of power, with the result that its conduct has increasingly being perceived as unpredictable.

A state is successful in European and international negotiations if it has properly defined goals and credible players, and if it uses them to formulate and pursue consistent strategies. A credible player is one whom is known for his or her political authoritative standing at home in the long term. In some cases individuals - as Monti is doing now - manage to stave off difficulties thanks to their own *personal* credibility, but this can only work on the short term. Lack of continuity can otherwise cause serious damage. Finally, while in times of need other countries put the promotion of their national interests *before* political loyalties, in Italy the reverse is the case. In some respects, Italy appears to be stuck in the age of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, in which the victory of one faction over another is what counts, and the fact that this may be damaging to the country matters little. Should this spirit prevail again in the spring of 2012, the possibilities for the country to change for good will come to a halt and its fate will be, once again, at stake.

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¹ “we have been working [to change the previous government] for one and half years and we made it”
<http://www.lapoliticaitaliana.it/Agenzia/?d=20120119&id=51145&print=1>