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Italy

The last stand of a system in crisis

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV469 - February 2014 -

Publication date: Tuesday 18 February 2014

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While we might dub Enrico Letta, recently thrown overboard by Matteo Renzi, the Copenhagen giraffe, Renzi might be characterised as the last stand. The last stand for a political-social system that has been carved up, taken apart and put in debt to the European Union but which is still functioning and whose leaders do want to be overwhelmed by the only real tidal wave that is rising in Europe which is anti-European, nationalist or populist or with more contradictory characteristics like the Five Star Movement in Italy. In this sense Renzi is the last card for all those pro-austerity, pro-government forces.

After last year's election and the recognition of the 5 Star Movement's explosive entry into parliament the Italian establishment thought it would be able to deal with it by rallying around President Napolitano's model: broad cross-party agreement, technical governments, absolute respect for the European parameters, complete rejection of any social struggles. This experiment has failed.

Napolitano has failed and even more than Letta has now been defeated. The fact that the experiment was not working was demonstrated first by Renzi's clear victory in the PD primary elections, the nth expression of people wanting to shake up the political system – even those from a responsible and obedient electorate like the PD's. Secondly Letta has only been able to distribute a few crumbs to people on the right or left, who are privileged or excluded but who are suffering really badly from the crisis. The epitome of this political uselessness has been the budgetary law. At this point we have seen growing discontent from the Confindustria (main bosses' organisation), other sectors, the banks and the trade unions. But this disquiet has also spread to those few politicians who are still lucid and understand the degree of people's alienation from politics.

In this framework we can see that Renzi's manoeuvre is to present himself as the man who, more than anybody else, given his past and using his eloquence and skills, can stand up to the anti-caste tidal wave that has been sweeping Italy. The Florentine mayor will do it in his own way, he has already begun, but in the name of the system as a whole. Even on behalf of the right of centre forces who have been torn apart by his move. In reality the real person defeated by Renzi is not Letta but Berlusconi, who had been attracted by the bait of the electoral reform, but has thereby opened the door for the PD leader to win credit within the right of centre supporters who are his true electoral target audience.

Renzi will lead a system he will try and renovate with continual shock tactics, he will try and get a breathing space from the European Union and bring about a liberal modernisation, a renewal of the system in response to some of the external pressures. In this sense it is a project of transformation, dressed up in contemporary clothes, and it signifies a new phase has opened up. Stripping off the clothes of a PD party leader and taking on the serious attire of a prime minister, Renzi will be free to speak to the whole country and build a new moderate political bloc from both the left and right that he will define as a "fortress" he will lead against the siege of the "new barbarians".

In this way he is carrying out both a new and old political shift which is both skilful but also desperate. If the entire parliamentary spectrum is hoovered up by this drive forward the manoeuvre could succeed in reorganising the political framework. If it does not work out Renzi will just be the latest leader to be chewed up by the crisis.

What we have to understand is how to correctly analyse the whole operation. Notwithstanding the various manoeuvres Renzi will make, the fireworks he will concoct and the propaganda that goes with it, the meaning of his government is already defined in the hypothesis of the electoral reform agreed with Berlusconi: shore up governability at all costs, reduce political space, build up a personalised and authoritarian democracy. A model which

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was finally unsuccessful for Silvio Berlusconi but which he used for the twenty years of his regime. Today Renzi is the first post-Berlusconi figure to really fill the political stage. But he also is the first to re-interpret and use the ideological detritus of that period,