

Silvio Berlusconi's revival of Forza Italia is unlikely to bring him back to power, but his career in Italian politics is far from finished

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2014/01/14/silvio-berlusconi-is-unlikely-to-bring-him-back-to-power-but-his-career-in-italian-politics-is-far-from-finished/

14/01/2014

*For the past few decades, Italian politics has been marked by the presence of Silvio Berlusconi. As **Daniele Albertazzi** writes, Berlusconi's revival of his old political party, Forza Italia, is his latest attempt to retain political influence within the country's party system. He argues that while Berlusconi is unlikely to enjoy the same success that he first had with the party, with Forza Italia currently polling around 21 per cent of the vote it would be reckless to dismiss his political prospects.*



On 18 November 2013, the Italian right-wing leader Silvio Berlusconi dissolved his party, *Popolo della Libertà* (PDL – People of Freedom), the founding of which he had announced to his supporters in Milan exactly six years earlier. He also relaunched the party he had first created in 1993: *Forza Italia* (FI – Go Italy). Allegedly born from the 'fusion' of FI with the post-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN – National Alliance), throughout its short existence the PDL turned out to be extremely divided, lacking purpose and a clear sense of identity.

Following the loss of roughly half of the PDL's votes in the [2013 general election](#) (6 million in total), and after its negative experience in government between 2008 and 2011 (characterised by the worsening of every national economic indicator), Berlusconi came to the conclusion that the PDL brand had become toxic. Moreover, the decision to bring the experiment of the PDL to an end was also dictated by Berlusconi's desire to take full control of the party he was leading once again.

As his failure to bring down the left-right executive currently governing Italy (in retaliation for the left's decision to press ahead with his expulsion from the Senate) had painfully shown once again, only a few days before the PDL's disbandment, by 2013 Berlusconi was no longer the 'owner' of the PDL and he could no longer be sure that it would consistently pursue the line he was dictating to it. Making it crystal clear that he wished to 'resurrect' the FI of 1993 and recapture the 'spirit' of those years, in his speech in November 2013 Berlusconi repeated word for word many of the promises and claims that he had made [back in 1993](#) when he launched his political career.



Silvio Berlusconi, Credit: sterte (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

As shown in the Table below, according to [recent polls](#), the re-established FI attracts roughly the same level of support the party enjoyed in the first election it contested in 1994, and it will most probably remain key to the centre-right's chances to beat the left and form a government in the foreseeable future. However, unlike 1993, Berlusconi's initiative is very unlikely to turn him into the fulcrum of Italian politics yet again.

Table: Voting intention in Italy (January 2014 / December 2013)

<i>Party</i>	<i>Percentage Support (10/1/14)</i>	<i>Percentage Support (20/12/13)</i>
Democratic Party (PD)	31.3	30.5
Five Star Movement (M5S)	22.1	21.3
Forza Italia (FI)	21.5	21.0
New Centre-Right (NCD)	4.1	4.6
Lega Nord (LN)	3.4	3.8
Left Ecology Freedom (SEL)	2.8	3.1
Union of the Centre (UDC)	2.2	2.3
Brothers of Italy (Fdl)	2.1	2.4

Note: Figures are from [Agora \(IXE\) polls](#) carried out on 10 January 2014 and 20 December 2013.

The main reason for this is that in the mid-nineties FI had managed to fill the huge gap that had opened up following the collapse of all governing parties in Italy, first and foremost the centrist *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC – Christian Democracy), due to high-profile investigations that had uncovered political corruption at the highest levels. Today, there is no such ‘opening’. The Italian political landscape remains crowded with other large parties which, on the basis of what we know at the moment, have a good chance of doing well at the polls if a general election is held in the near future.

Of these, the most important is the centre-left *Partito Democratico* (PD – Democratic Party) which, according to [current data](#), carries more than 30 per cent of the vote (versus FI’s 21 per cent). It has strong coalition potential, since any centre-left electoral alliance would need to gravitate around it. As explained in James Newell and Arianna Giovannini’s [recent article](#), the mayor of Florence Matteo Renzi recently won the PD’s leadership contest (by a large margin), having argued for years that the party ‘needed to undergo fundamental renewal based on a generational turnover among its leaders and principal spokespeople’.

Whereas in 1994 Berlusconi could brand himself as the novelty of the forthcoming election, a savvy entrepreneur ‘loaned’ to politics and ready to do for Italy what he had done for himself; today he would be leading his party into an election as the longest-serving former PM in Italian post-war history, someone who led his first cabinet when François Mitterrand and Boris Yeltsin were in power. Even turning a blind eye to Berlusconi’s age (which is twice that of Renzi), it has become impossible for the right-wing leader to convincingly argue that he is, in any sense, ‘new’.

Although he will not be the centre-right candidate for prime minister in a forthcoming election, as he has lost the right to stand for public office for several years as a consequence of his recent conviction for tax evasion, he remains the leader of the largest party of the right. Given the widespread disillusionment of the Italian electorate with the traditional political class, the fact that Berlusconi is now very much a member of it will hardly help his cause, and that of the alliance which the right-wing leader will need to build to beat the left.

The second major competitor on the right is the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S – Five Star Movement), Western Europe’s most successful new party – one that has managed to grow from 0 to 25 per cent approval in four years thanks to its criticism of the political class, the communication skills of its leader Beppe Grillo and the movement’s ability to

effectively integrate the use of new media with face-to-face campaigning. Although support for the M5S has diminished by a few percentage points since the general election of April 2013, it still matches Berlusconi's FI. Importantly, it is now the M5S that gives voice to those voters (and there are many) who are disappointed by politicians as a whole, many of whom had previously voted for the PDL.

Not only is there no political vacuum for Berlusconi's 're-founded' FI to fill but, due to the decision by some former PDL ministers and MPs to break away from Berlusconi in recent weeks and create a splinter centre-right party (NCD), FI now leans more heavily to the right than its predecessors and, as such, it may find it more difficult to attract moderate voters (the target of Berlusconi's efforts, according to him).

The most interesting [similarity](#) between the recreated FI and its predecessors concerns its nature as a personal party created by Berlusconi for Berlusconi – as the speed at which the PDL was shelved shows. In short, the re-established FI will certainly be yet another vehicle through which the right-wing leader will try to fulfil his political vision, pursue his interests and defend himself from the justice system. The fact that Berlusconi has already [provided](#) around €110 million worth of bank guarantees to the new party would seem to support this claim.

Speculating about the possible consequences of this 'return' for the political system as a whole is especially challenging because the current electoral law (passed by a Berlusconi government in 2005) was [declared](#) unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in December 2013, making it unclear under what legislation the next election will be held. If, like the present one, the new law encourages the creation of pre-electoral alliances, then not much is likely to change because of FI's re-establishment.

In that case, Berlusconi would be forced to try and revive a large coalition of the right as the general election approaches, and this will most probably have to include anyone who is willing to oppose the left. In the end, as a member of this right-wing coalition, FI would find itself fighting the election alongside those who have recently broken away from their leader. The real game changer may instead turn out to be Matteo Renzi's election as the PD's leader, if he can attract those who have turned to the M5S in recent years, or supported the right, not to mention abstainers and the undecided – the latter [constituting](#) two in five voters at present.

Like Berlusconi in 1994, Renzi has portrayed himself as the 'enemy' of the traditional political class, and strengthened his credibility by waging war on his own party's *nomenclatura* for several years. If he can convince a sufficient number of disillusioned voters to give a 'renewed' PD a chance, the centre-left coalition may manage to win outright this time. That *would* be a turning point in Italian politics – a clear-cut victory delivering strong majorities in both Houses of Parliament to the centre-left, which has failed to achieve this since Berlusconi launched his political career in 1994.

At this stage, however, this is merely speculation. While some foreign journalists have persistently announced Berlusconi's political demise – a sport that started spreading shortly after the collapse of his first government in 1994 and continues to prove popular [to this day](#) – more sophisticated observers of Italian politics have always been aware of his ability to give voice to an important section of the Italian electorate on crucial issues such as, for instance, taxation.

Having lost many votes, his Senate seat and the chance to hold public office for several years, it is now safe to say that Berlusconi's star is waning. However, he is far from finished, as he has a good understanding of what centre-right voters want, he remains very much in control of the media and financial empire through which he launched his political career twenty years ago, and he seems determined to keep leading the largest political party of the Italian right in the foreseeable future.

Given the stamina and determination he has amply demonstrated during the last two decades as a political leader, and despite the many setbacks of recent months, those who write Berlusconi off now as irrelevant and announce the end of his political career do so at their own peril and are likely to be proven wrong yet again, as they have been many times in the past.

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