

Italy's new centrist government isn't the end of Matteo Salvini's dreams of power

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A coalition committed to spending cuts could merely strengthen the far-right Lega.

From the outset of August it was clear that Italian politicians would be denied their usual month off. As his far-right Lega party polled over 35 per cent, Matteo Salvini's rallies at beach resorts around central Italy were transparent preparations for an early general election. But when the interior minister made his move on 8 August — declaring his intention to pass a vote of no confidence in Giuseppe Conte's government — things started to go wrong.

Salvini expected that the end of the populist administration, formed by Lega and the Five Star Movement (M5s) in June 2018, would force a snap election. Conte, a law professor and an independent, has no parliamentary base of his own, and M5s controls fewer than one in three seats. Yet just days after Conte was forced to resign, he has returned as prime minister, arranging a new governing coalition between M5s and the centre-left Democratic Party (PD).

This reversal has cheered Salvini's opponents. In a Facebook post, former prime minister Matteo Renzi, a leading powerbroker in the PD, described the result as "[Institutions 1, Populism 0](#)". Yet the M5s-PD pact now expected to block Salvini — and mooted to govern until 2022 — relies on a curious political blend, uniting centrist pro-Europeans with what was once considered the ultimate anti-establishment movement.

Activists assembling for the PD's national meeting in Ravenna were certainly surprised to be greeting such a pact: as one young activist commented, "[A few weeks ago it'd have been pure science fiction](#)". On Tuesday, M5s founder Beppe Grillo compared his role to that of "[Moses parting the waters](#)", three weeks later he called on his party to abandon its historic opposition to the PD in order to "stop the barbarians" of the Lega.

Certainly, this is a remarkable about-turn by the typically polarised parties. Grillo's guru, the late Gianroberto Casaleggio, insisted he would quit the M5s if it ever governed with the PD; [Maria Elena Boschi](#), a former minister and Renzi ally, has several outstanding libel cases against M5s officials; a recent social care scandal in the town of Bibbiano even saw M5s members accuse the centre-left party of orchestrating the kidnap of children.

However, the fear of a punishing encounter with the electorate has prompted a 180-degree turn. Between the March 2018 general election and this May's European election, the M5s slumped from 32 to 17 per cent, while Salvini's Lega surged in the opposite direction. A fresh vote was widely expected to hand a majority to his far-right party, perhaps together with post-fascist allies. The new governing alliance will, at least, delay this prospect.

In his triumphant Facebook post, Renzi went further, proclaiming that "Today, Salvini has left the political stage". In truth, the generally volatile state of Italian politics probably cautions against such optimism. The Lega leader has suffered a humiliation, but has responded in pugnacious fashion,

calling on M5s members to vote down the pact and announcing an anti-government demonstration in Rome for 19 October.

The new administration could in fact blow wind into Salvini's sails. He has been keen to portray this as a coalition made in Brussels — citing M5s's vote in favour of Ursula von der Leyen as European Commission president and her predecessor Romano Prodi's own call for an "Ursula Coalition" in Italy. In accordance with Eurozone spending limits, the new government will have to make €23bn in spending cuts this autumn — a likely gift to Salvini.

The next week should see Conte form a new cabinet. Grillo has called for it to draw on non-political figures, while the PD has sought the replacement or demotion of all sitting ministers. M5s supporters will also get to vote on the pact, though there is unlikely to be an upset — in the past they have backed similar zigzags, including a quixotic 2017 vote to shift from Nigel Farage's faction in Brussels to the liberal ALDE group (and then back again).

European leaders will hope that the M5s-PD pact will not just bring Salvini to heel, but turn Italy towards a more centrist agenda. Sharp differences remain, including over pensions, welfare and infrastructure projects. But an M5s that once rejected political "horse-trading" is today displaying a more typical chameleonism, as an "anti-establishment" force drawn to the heart of Italy's institutions.

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