

**Italy**

## Renzi pleads for support ahead of Italy's referendum

Italian prime minister tells voters country will 'never go anywhere' if reforms rejected



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4 HOURS AGO by: **James Politi** in Naples

Matteo Renzi has warned voters that Italy will be doomed to inertia and red tape if they reject his constitutional reforms, as he made a final dash through the struggling south to plead for support ahead of [Sunday's referendum \(http://next.ft.com/content/bc656c2c-8d2d-35b0-b297-oca57bfe740f\)](http://next.ft.com/content/bc656c2c-8d2d-35b0-b297-oca57bfe740f).

At a campaign rally held in a large, Fascist-era convention centre in Naples late on Thursday, the Italian prime minister expressed confidence that his side would prevail but also warned the country would “never go anywhere” if the reforms were rejected.

“This model will lead Italy to live in paralysis, in the swamp, blocked. It has to be clear,” said Mr [Renzi \(https://www.ft.com/topics/people/Matteo\\_Renzi\)](https://www.ft.com/topics/people/Matteo_Renzi), who took office in early 2014 and has threatened to resign if he loses the referendum. “I can go home tomorrow, that’s not a problem. But for the country, if we don’t change now, we won’t change any more,” he added.

According to opinion polls last published on November 18 before a two-week blackout, Mr Renzi’s Yes camp is trailing the No camp by a few percentage points, suggesting he could well lose the fight. But there is still a large share of undecided voters, especially in the south, which he is targeting during the last stretch of the campaign.

As well as Naples, Italy's third largest city, Mr Renzi is due to stop in Palermo and Reggio Calabria on Friday, before a closing event back in his home town of Florence. Meanwhile, leaders of the opposition to Mr Renzi's reforms, including Beppe Grillo, the leader of the [anti-establishment Five Star Movement \(http://next.ft.com/content/401f208a-b7ab-11e6-ba85-95d1533d9a62\)](http://next.ft.com/content/401f208a-b7ab-11e6-ba85-95d1533d9a62), and Matteo Salvini, the head of the anti-euro, anti-immigrant Northern League, are planning competing closing rallies in Turin and Milan respectively.

Opponents have described Mr Renzi's reforms, which would reduce the powers of the Italian senate and regional governments to ease legislative and administrative gridlock, as a dangerous power grab by the elite.

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The Italian referendum may not only determine the political fate of Mr Renzi, but is being closely watched because of its impact on financial markets, amid concerns that a No vote could plunge the country into a new period of political uncertainty and damage efforts by troubled Italian banks to raise capital. Italian shares and bonds have sold off leading up to the vote, with rising jitters regarding the outcome.

At the Neapolitan rally, before a crowd packed with members of Coldiretti, Italy's main agricultural lobby group, Mr Renzi struck a light-hearted tone, mocking Mr Grillo and Mr Salvini while pushing his supporters to convince their friends and neighbours. "I'm asking you to get to work the next few days, this match is in your hands," Mr Renzi said. "I'm going ahead with a smile, with the tranquillity and the freedom of knowing that we are presenting a serious proposal," he added.

Mr Renzi has chosen the South to focus his last efforts because most opinion polls have shown it to be the region where he is trailing the most, amid broad dissatisfaction with the poor state of the economy. Italy's sluggish recovery from the great recession has barely been felt in many areas of the Mezzogiorno, where unemployment and poverty are high. Outside Mr Renzi's rally, a small group of protesters confronted police in riot gear with a large red sign saying: "We're saying no. Go home, Renzi".

"The south is where the rejection is strongest, but it is also where there are the most undecided voters," says Franco Pavoncello, a political-science professor and president of John Cabot University in Rome.

Inside the convention centre, Anna Maria Pagano, a 42-year old woman from Terzigno, a small town under Mount Vesuvius, said she still had "faith" that Mr Renzi could pull off a victory. "I

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Matteo Renzi

want the country to rebound, especially for my two kids," she said. "I really hope their will be change," she added.

Mr Renzi has acknowledged that he made a key mistake early in the campaign, by vowing to abandon politics if he were to lose. He has since toned down those claims, suggesting he may still remain at the helm of the

Democratic party, and in any case the reforms need to be

judged on their merits. But in the past few weeks, Mr Renzi has thrown all his energy into the campaign, appearing on TV, doing Facebook chats with voters and organising rallies across the country.

"He didn't play it very well: first he defined it very personally — then he shied away and now he is back to having a strong role," says Mr Pavoncello. "All this hesitation doesn't help," he added.

Should Mr Renzi be defeated, Italy's political future would be in the hands of Sergio Mattarella, the country's president, who will have to launch talks on the formation of a new government. Mr Mattarella could reappoint Mr Renzi, if he accepts, or look for an alternative. Among the most frequently mentioned names are Pier Carlo Padoan, the finance minister, Dario Franceschini, the culture minister, Graziano Delrio, the transport minister, and Pietro Grasso, the president of the Senate — all of whom come from the ruling PD.

Streaming out of the event in Naples, Lucio Luongo, a 59-year old grain farmer from the nearby province of Avellino, says he would lament Mr Renzi's departure. "He can really do something, not just for Italy, but even at a European level," says Mr Luongo. "It's been a tough campaign. I don't know what happens if the No wins. Maybe all the opposition should think of forming a government together," he quips.

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