

E finita per Silvio?

The recent Italian national election has surprised many observers. Romano Prodi's centre-left coalition, although victorious, did not secure the large victory many expected, while Berlusconi's centre-right coalition held up well, keeping its leader very much alive on the political scene.

Both coalitions, however, remain far too large and heterogeneous to ensure effective governments. This innate problem is compounded by the very narrow victory of the leftist coalition, which won with a margin of only 23,000 votes in the lower house. Thanks to Berlusconi's own reforms to the lower house, it was enough to earn Prodi a healthy majority there (348 to 281). In the Senate, however, the slim majority of only two seats is far more problematic, and represents the real Achilles heel of the future Prodi government.

Thus the Prodi government starts with a big question mark over its longevity. A rather passive personality bent more on mediation than initiative, Romano Prodi suffers from another fundamental weakness: he is the leader of the coalition, but does not control any party in that coalition. Thus, he is constantly forced to mediate among strong party leaders who can rely on tight party organisations.

This is a serious limitation that became quite apparent with the election of the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, whom Prodi was forced to choose from among members of the Democrats of the Left, the largest party in his coalition. This took away from him any room for manoeuvre with the opposition for a more bipartisan figure. Such a lack of independent power might become a serious problem for Prodi, should the rise of some divisive political issue reduce his coalition's present willingness to gloss over its differences in order to form a government.

But the decision of Mr Berlusconi and his coalition not to vote for Mr Napolitano, even when it was clear he would win, is also quite revealing about the opposition's present strategy. Berlusconi and his allies appear convinced that the centre-left coalition government, too divided and with far too small a majority in the Senate, will not last long. Thus, for the moment they have chosen to remain in an endless electoral campaign – epitomised by Berlusconi's disturbing refusal to concede defeat – in the hope that a total closure to any collaborative gestures from the majority will erode the Prodi government and lead to new general elections within the next two years at most.

This strategy, which so far Berlusconi has been able to enforce with an iron fist upon his allies, serves his personal ambitions well. He can maintain his role as the undisputed leader of his coalition if the political climate is one of head-on clash, especially if the prospects of a relatively early election should arise. On the other hand, should the legislature last

the entire five years, the image of Berlusconi as the head of the centre-right coalition in 2011 would probably lose strength. By then, he would have been the leader of the coalition for almost 18 years. Probably such a long tenure would prove to be difficult even for a man of his personality, forcing him to make room for someone younger and with a less problematic history. Furthermore, he might simply lose interest in politics altogether, as is already being rumoured. Therefore, it is reasonable to imagine that the longer Prodi's government lasts, the weaker Berlusconi will become as leader of the opposition.

But even though it might be short-lived, Romano Prodi's government will be formed quickly in the coming days. What difference will it make in terms of policy from what we have seen during the Berlusconi era? The changes will probably not be far-reaching. Faced with the need not to rock a rather fragile boat, the majority might be inclined to 'survive without governing', that is, doing the minimum necessary to ensure compliance with the EU's economic and financial requests. This might very well put a stop to calls for expensive, populist reforms coming from the radical quarters of the coalition.

A similar argument can be made for foreign policy, where Prodi's government might differ only in emphasis and not in fundamental postures from its predecessor. The Iraq withdrawal will most probably follow the previous government's timeline, and while there might be greater attention paid to European issues, it would not be a surprise to see the new government continue to pay close attention to the traditional alliance with the United States, a factor that the left has always considered a fundamental cornerstone of its international political legitimacy. ●



With Italy's new prime minister Romano Prodi set to announce his cabinet in the coming days, **Franco Pavoncello** looks at how the big parties – and personalities – are set to realign

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Romano Prodi's slim majority leaves a big question mark over his government's longevity – and its ability to effect long-lasting political change