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More than a marriage of convenience

Italy's Social Democrats and the Five Star Movement have far more in common than just the fear of Matteo Salvini

Read this article in German.

A coalition between Partito Democratico (PD) and Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy? Just four weeks ago this idea seemed completely absurd. PD members and politicians in particular would have outright rejected it.

But now the coalition between these two political forces, which until recently treated each other as the most intimate enemies, is a done deal. The anti-establishment Five Stars considered the PD as the incarnation of the 'political caste' to be fought. And in the eyes of the PD, the Five Stars were a populist force endangering the continued existence of democracy.

Of all political parties, these two now want to rule Italy together. The Independent Giuseppe Conte remains Prime Minister. Lega leader Matteo Salvini, who through his push for snap elections brought this coalition to life in the first place, has already proclaimed that the new government will only exist for a short time. Only the 'fear of the Lega' and the greed for political posts would hold them together.

But a closer look at the M5S's history shows that they could have much more in common with the PD than generally assumed. The M5S is by no means one of the classic right-wing populist movements in Europe; it has little in common with the Rassemblement National, the Alternative für Deutschland or Austria's Freedom Party.

Beppe Grillo's flirt with the PD

On the contrary, the Five Stars originated from the intention of its founder, the comedian Beppe Grillo, to influence the Italian centre-left camp – so first and foremost the PD. Grillo first founded a blog in 2005 that focused on environmental issues and the fight for corruption-free politics. In particular, he took aim at Silvio Berlusconi, who ruled Italy in

the years 2001 to 2006 and 2008 to 2011. Back then, Grillo systematically sought dialogue with the centre-left camp. In June 2006, he met then Prime Minister Romano Prodi with 1.5 million signatures calling for an ecological transition. Later he complained that Prodi had 'fallen asleep' during their conversation.

In September 2007, Grillo organised the 'Vaffa day' (the 'Go-to-hell-day') with rallies all over the country to collect signatures for a referendum. Its central concern was to prohibit previously convicted politicians from running for parliament, to limit the maximum duration of parliamentary mandates to two legislative periods and to introduce a system of preferential votes on party lists during elections. Within one day, 330,000 signatures were collected – and they, too, were mainly signatures against the Berlusconi's right-wing. Grillo had become the mouthpiece of hundreds of thousands of dissatisfied citizens.

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His movement initially developed at the local level: in local elections, 'lists of friends of Beppe Grillo' competed. At that time, they didn't think of organising a national political force.

Grillo even tried to run for the PD's new party leader in the 2009 primary elections. He even joined the party for this reason. However, the PD rejected his request. Piero Fassino, one of the leading PD politicians, said at the time that if Grillo wanted to go into politics, he should found a movement – 'then we'll see how many votes he gets'.

The founding of M5S

Grillo took Fassino at his word and founded the M5S in autumn 2009. The movement's programme stands on two legs. On the one hand, it has a strong ecological agenda: The Five Stars advocate for public water supply, environmental protection and radical waste avoidance, the strengthening of public transport, an energy policy favouring renewables and increased efficiency as well as the expansion of internet infrastructure.

However, it was the second programmatic axis that justified the opposition to the PD: the fight against the 'political caste'. The M5S went far beyond demanding that corruption and clientelism should be banished from politics. It now thought about the utopia of a direct democracy without parties, in which the citizens themselves take decision-making into their own hands via the internet.

That's when, in the Five Star Movement, the distinction between the

right-wing Berlusconi camp and the moderate left-wing PD was lost. Now they were all 'old parties' in which 'mummies' set the tone. The PD's reaction was equally harsh: it elevated the M5S to the rank of a more or less anti-constitutional force.

Nevertheless, there were always moments in the following years when rapprochement would have been possible. In 2013, the M5S experienced a sensational breakthrough in the parliamentary elections with 25.9 per cent. The PD had also achieved 25 per cent but did not have its own parliamentary majority under its then chairman Pierluigi Bersani. Bersani offered talks to the M5S but was humiliated by their representatives in a publicly broadcast meeting. At that time, the M5S held the radical position of not wanting to enter into any coalitions. Instead, a separate majority was sought in the medium term to reshape Italy.

Only a few weeks after the elections, parliament had to elect the president. The M5S, which described itself as 'neither right nor left', presented its members a list of ten candidates. The surprise: only leftists figured on the list, among them the highly respected constitutional lawyer Stefano Rodotà, who was finally nominated. But now the PD refused any support, although Grillo had declared in a surprising volte-face that this could start a new era between the two political forces.

Renzi's miscalculations

In 2014 at the latest, this potential new era was finally buried when Matteo Renzi was elected PD chairman and then prime minister. Renzi was banking on a total confrontation with the Five Stars. Nevertheless, in 2015, when the new election of the president was due, the M5S again presented its members with a list of nine – with two politicians of the 'hostile' party, PD founder and former prime minister Romano Prodi and Pierluigi Bersani. Prodi ranked second in the internal basic vote with 20 per cent, Bersani fourth with 11 per cent.

However, all these signals were lost in the daily polemics and hardly noticed by the public. The confrontation was once again exacerbated in 2016, when Renzi pushed both constitutional and electoral reform. The M5S led the movement against reform and helped Renzi suffer a bitter defeat in the December 2016 referendum.

However, in the coalition negotiations something emerged that's actually not so surprising: the

The March 2018 elections led to the triumph of the M5S, which won 32.7 per cent, while the PD crashed to 18.7 per cent. Renzi resigned as party leader but still had the majority of PD factions in the House of Representatives and

programmatic overlaps between M5S and PD are greater than they were between M5S and Lega.

Senate behind him.

The M5S under its leader Luigi Di Maio now repeated what the PD had done in 2013: it approached the PD with a coalition offer. However, Renzi – although he had just resigned as party leader – rudely rejected this offer. It was only then that the coalition between M5S and right-wing populist Lega was formed.

Renzi thought that the 'Alliance of Populists' would quickly lose its appeal in power. However, that didn't happen. The new government remained popular throughout its term and the approval ratings for the two main parties remained at over 50 per cent. Within a year, however, the balance of power in the coalition was completely reversed. The M5S fell to 17 per cent in the May 2019 European elections, while the Lega under Matteo Salvini doubled its vote share from 17 to 34 per cent.

While Salvini's rise seemed unstoppable, the PD continued to treat the M5S as its central opponent. Only the new party leadership under Nicola Zingaretti, who was elected in an open primary election in March 2019, cautiously moved away from this line. However, Zingaretti also ruled out any possibility of a coalition with the M5S. Instead, he wanted to seek 'dialogue with the voters of the Five Stars'. Renzi, as his opponent within the party, threatened Zingaretti openly with a party split if the PD tried to approach the M5S.

Hope for Italy

Against this backdrop, there was only one viable path in the government crisis triggered by Salvini's Lega on 8 August: that of new elections. But, of all people, it was now Renzi who took the initiative in the face of an imminent landslide victory for Salvini. He called on his party to form a government with the Five Stars. And on the other hand, M5S founder Grillo launched an appeal to stop the 'new barbarians' of the Lega: 'No way we have new elections!'

This prepared the ground for the new coalition, a real political miracle that, for the time being, has to be considered a purely negative coalition, held together by the fear of Salvini's victory and Italy's turn to the radical right.

However, in the coalition negotiations something emerged that's actually not so surprising: the programmatic overlaps between M5S and PD are

greater than they were between M5S and Lega. Whether in social or tax policy, attitudes towards Europe, education or innovation policy: both sides discovered common points that they have deliberately ignored over the years.

Grillo even let himself be carried away to demand 'euphoria' from the supporters of the new coalition force. The PD debated immediately whether they should not also form electoral alliances with the M5S in the upcoming regional elections in order to beat the right. These signals seem a little hasty, but they show: an initially negative coalition does not have to remain one if the two coalition partners really get out of their trenches.



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