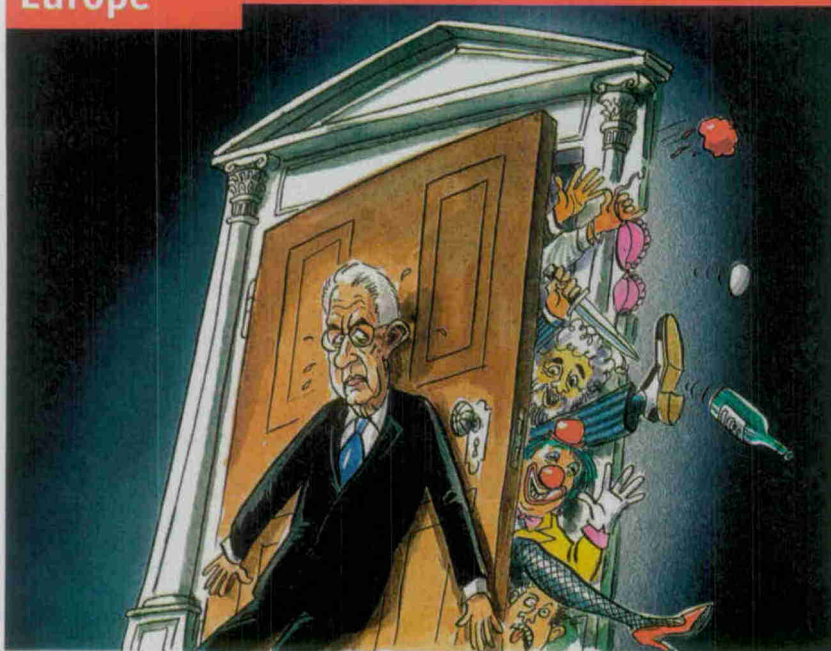


Europe

The Economist November 24th 2012 29



Also in this section

30 France's opposition

30 Germany's neo-Nazis

31 Justice in Croatia

32 Charlemagne: Agricultural blues

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Italian politics

So, what next?

ROME

The election next spring will see a newly sober Italy set against its more turbulent recent past—with unpredictable results

IT IS hard not to feel some sympathy for Mario Monti, Italy's prime minister. He was in the Gulf this week, trying (with some success) to persuade oil-rich investors that Italy had turned over a new leaf, when the spotlight was suddenly turned back to an affair at home as lurid as any in Italy's recent, scandal-ridden past. And his predecessor, Silvio Berlusconi, was once again at the centre of it.

On November 19th, just as Qatar was agreeing to invest up to €1 billion (\$1.3 billion) in Italian business, it emerged that Mr Berlusconi's accountant, Giuseppe Spinelli, had been taken hostage by kidnapers more than a month earlier. Mr Spinelli won brief notoriety last year as the man who paid women to attend the former prime minister's notorious "Bunga Bunga" parties. Bizarrely, his captors were said to want to sell Mr Berlusconi documents they claimed would help him in a court battle. The evidence was meant to be crucial to the media magnate's appeal against a 2011 ruling ordering him to pay €560m in compensation to a business rival. Among many questions over the affair is why the police were not informed for more than 24 hours. Mr Berlusconi's lawyers deny that he paid the kidnapers.

The episode was yet another reminder that there are two sides to Italy. One is represented by its sober current leader. The

other is turbulent and scandal-prone. Unfortunately, 12 months after Mr Monti replaced Mr Berlusconi, and with a general election looming next spring, this second Italy seems to be reasserting itself. Indeed, Mr Monti conceded as much in the Gulf when he noted that he could offer no guarantees for the future. After some criticism at home, he added that he was confident his country would "always have a responsible government." But in fact, he was more accurate the first time.

Barely four months before March 10th, the most likely date of the election, the opinion polls find that a movement led by a comedian, Beppe Grillo, is the second-biggest force in Italian politics, with almost a fifth of the vote. Mr Grillo's Five Star Movement is committed not to join any coalition after the election. That creates a risk that Italy may end up in the hands of a weak minority government.

Moreover, nobody yet knows who will lead the main alliances on either the left or the right. The left's contender is to be chosen in a two-round primary, starting on November 25th, that is expected to turn into a generational duel between Pier Luigi Bersani, the leader of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), and the young mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi.

The conservative People of Freedom (PDL) movement, founded by Mr Berlus-

coni, is also supposed to be holding a primary to choose his successor as candidate for prime minister. The most likely winner is his former justice minister, Angelino Alfano. But there is as yet no date for the vote, and although it has attracted an embarrassingly large number of aspirants, the polls suggest it could draw a derisory number of voters. And the rules under which it will be held are unknown.

That is true also of the general election itself. The current electoral law is universally deplored. It gives voters no say in the choice of their constituency representative. But it does provide a measure of stability. The winning alliance is given bonus seats that guarantee it a majority in at least one of parliament's two chambers. Projections on the basis of recent polls suggest that, under this law, a coalition between the PD and the more radical Left, Ecology and Freedom could just command a slim majority in both houses.

But for months now, the main parties in parliament have been wrangling over a reform that could limit bonus seats, either by awarding fewer of them or by making them dependent on the winning alliance obtaining an unrealistically high share of the vote. A restricted bonus would be more likely to mean a hung parliament, which would be welcome to the PDL. It is lagging wretchedly in the polls, but it could re-enter government in a broad-based coalition. Paradoxically, an inconclusive outcome is also relished by those who are keenest to see Mr Monti stay on.

As head of a technocratic government, he cannot take sides. But his neutrality could give him a continuing role as leader of a broad coalition formed to give Italy a strong government after an indecisive election. The political leader calling most ▶▶

ardently for this has long been Pier Ferdinando Casini, leader of the Union of the Centre (UDC), the biggest of three parties in a centrist alliance occupying the space between the PD and the PDL. This week Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, boss of Ferrari and a former leader of Confindustria, the employers' federation, launched another movement to furnish Mr Monti with a "democratic and electoral basis". Yet it is not clear that the prime minister is ready to commit himself to either group.

In truth, Mr Monti is a psephological oddity. A recent poll found that he is widely respected: 48% of voters said they trusted him, only six points less than when he took office a year earlier. Over the same period, however, support for his government has plunged by 22 points, to 32%.

The prime minister may be right to claim that his austerity policies have saved Italy from disaster. But they have not been popular. Another poll finds that only 22% of the electorate wants Mr Monti to stay on. Even that is more than the 15% prepared to vote for parties that back him.

As has been the case ever since he took office, Mr Monti's biggest challenge is not of personal credibility, but of democratic legitimacy. Mr Alfano declared this week that "you can't govern a country without asking the opinion of its citizens". But that is precisely what Mr Monti has done for the past 12 months. He may yet be called on to do the same again. ■