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THE POLITICAL RIGHT

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General context

Since the unification of Italy, several models of party systems have followed each other on the national political stage (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2008; Salvadori, 2013). However, since the foundation of the Italian Republic, the party system has been largely stable. This was a defining feature of the political system until the early 1990s, when Italian democracy entered a phase of endless transition (Ignazi, 1997; Pasquino, 2002; Morlino, 1998). More generally, the dismantlement of the old party system could be seen as the result of some deeply rooted conditions (Morlino and Tarchi, 1996; Morlino, 1998): a crisis of ideology, the secularization of political subcultures, Europeanization, globalization, the mediatization of politics. Furthermore, other elements contributed to this change: the Manipulite (‘Clean Hands’) judicial investigation, the crisis of distribution policies, and the April 1993 referendum results. Endogenous and exogenous factors, operating in the short and medium term, can help explain the reasons for the crisis of the Italian political system in the 1990s and its consequent transition (1994). A decade later, it is now necessary to account for the failure to reach political stability in Italy and for the outbreak of the new crisis in 2010–11, with the 2013 election providing a truly uncertain political outcome (Morlino et al., 2013). Furthermore, it will give rise to some considerations with regard to three more specific aspects relevant for the purpose of this chapter. The first aspect relates to the transformation of the post-Fascist right and, therefore, the emergence of conservative, not confessional and ‘majority vocation’ parties. The second aspect concerns the role played by Berlusconi’s party (FI and then PDL) in the 1993–2013 political cycle. In fact, the 2011 political crisis could be considered as the failure to institutionalize a personal party. The third aspect is connected to the nature of this institutionalization, which appeared not only weak but also inconsistent and ineffective (Levitsky, 1998). FI and PDL are personal parties – depending on Berlusconi – whose partial consolidation affects both political competition (which tends to radicalize) and party system (which remains fluid). The 2013 general election confirmed this scenario but showed, for the first time, the risk of marginalization for the PDL, which no longer represented the party of change.

From Forza Italia to Popolo della Libertà and back

The rise of Berlusconi’s party can be better understood by looking at the Italian political situation in the early 1990s. In those years, the restructuring of the party system laid the basis for a new
subject, requiring a political entrepreneur. Although a movement for institutional and political renewal was organized around Mario Segni, it was Silvio Berlusconi who succeeded in this enterprise of transforming Italian politics. Forza Italia, however, was not just ‘another party’, but a totally new party, as Berlusconi himself said (2003). It was a personality-driven party; organizationally lightweight and flexible, based on political marketing and extensive use of media; an anti-political movement able to address the crisis of the parties.

That said, considering both institutional constraints and the main right-wing party evolution, the 1994–2013 period can be easily divided into three main stages: the transitional phase, or imperfect bipolarism (1993–2001), asymmetrical alternance and fragmented and polarized bipolarism (2001–11), with Berlusconi governments replacing the two-year Prodi government, and finally depoliticized competition (2011–12), which characterized the crisis of Berlusconism and the ‘technical’ government led by Mario Monti. The 2013 general election opens the door to a new political stage which witnessed the survival of the considerably weakened PDL.

The foundation and ‘the crossing of the desert’ (1993–2001)

On 26 January 1994, in a message broadcast on his Channel 5, Berlusconi announced his ‘entry into the political arena’ and presented his own political movement, Forza Italia. A few months later, more than 8 million Italian citizens supported him at the general election. His Forza Italia party topped the polls with 21 per cent of votes and obtained an overall 15.7 per cent of the seats (99 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 32 in the Senate). In a short time and starting from scratch, he set up a formidable machinery to gain popular consensus and an exceptional and asymmetrical electoral coalition, which included in the North of Italy a regional party, Lega Nord, and in South and Central Italy, the post-Fascist party Alleanza Nazionale (AN) led by Gianfranco Fini. The success of the centre-right opened the door to an anti-establishment coalition government. FI, AN and LN reflected a mixture of anti-state, anti-party feelings and an aversion to the political regime of the First Republic set up by the 1948 Constitution with the allied Christian Democratic Centre (CCD), the political group originating from the old Christian Democracy, which played the difficult role of balancing the different needs.

Berlusconi’s party was characterized by a negative identity stemming from anti-party statements and by the ‘primary, fundamental, original and irreplaceable factor’ of anti-communism (Are, 1997: 186). By contrast, in a positive way, the identity of FI (and then of the PDL) tried to reconcile, albeit with some contradictions, different values coming from ‘strongly rooted Italian political traditions’ (Berlusconi, 2003: 13) such as populism, reformist socialism and liberalism. Berlusconi’s style, inclined to radicalization and divisions, favoured the polarisation of political competition which characterized the last two decades. Such politics, moderate in political discourses but radical in strategies, cannot be understood without considering at least one other factor: Silvio Berlusconi’s personality and biography (Frattini, 2003: 76).

The characterizing feature of the original model of FI, and later PDL, is that of ‘personal party’ (Calise, 2000; Raniolo, 2013). This label can be seen in a twofold way. First, FI’s ‘electoral appeal is not based on any program or ideology, but rather on the personal charisma of the leader or candidate, who is portrayed as indispensable to the resolution of the country’s problems or crises’ (Günther and Diamond, 2001: 28). Second, its formation called for considerable use of human and logistical resources, which, almost without exception, came from companies belonging to the financial group founded and chaired by Berlusconi (Poli, 2001: 30). However, on the whole, FI is an organization in which the dividing line between public and private, as well as between business and party, is blurred – which resulted in a corrosive effect on the rule of law in the decade following. FI tends to rely on Berlusconi’s personal
charisma, which is largely an impure charisma – or, better, a manufactured charisma (Ginsborg, 2003; Ceri, 2011) – with strongly patrimonial connotations.

Silvio Berlusconi’s centre-right coalition included his own FI and other six parties, among which was the League, which defected from the coalition, unwilling to cooperate with the ‘post-Fascist’ National Alliance. The inclusion in the government of ministers from AN for the first time caused concerns and misgivings at the international level (Ignazi and Katz, 1995). Thus, owing to all those factors of weakness the first Berlusconi government was obliged to resign after only seven months (December 1994).

A period of institutional tensions followed, characterized by a conflict with the head of state and political uncertainty. Under the technical government led by Dini – a former minister in Berlusconi’s cabinet – the foundation stage of FI could be considered over. The 1996 elections were won by the centre-left coalition formed by the Ulivo (the Olive Tree) backed by the Partito di Rifondazione Comunista, PRC (Party of Communist Refoundation) under Romano Prodi’s leadership. FI, without Lega Nord, LN (Northern League), won 20.6 per cent of the vote (7,715,342 votes) and obtained 123 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (only 47 in the Senate) with 420,000 fewer voters than in the 1994 elections (see Table 14.1). Thus, FI’s ‘crossing of the desert’ started, as was emphatically depicted by its leader.

While FI was in opposition, Berlusconi addressed some issues aimed at strengthening the internal party organization and spreading it throughout the country, which culminated in the first National Party Congress held on 16–18 April 1998. During this period, several attempts to institutionalize FI were undertaken by adopting different organizational models: Previti’s original project (1994), based on the American party model, a more sophisticated plan drafted by Giuliano Urbani, but immediately discarded, and finally Claudio Scajola’s proposal which laid the basis of the new Statute of FI (18 January 1997). From an organizational point of view, it can be said that a few years after its creation and after having lost its symbiotic relationship with Fininvest, FI was no longer an ‘instant party’. Yet, party institutionalization remained weak, with strong centrifugal forces in the periphery, especially during negative electoral stages.

### From hegemony to crisis (2001–11)

The elections of 13 May 2001 provided Berlusconi and his allies with the chance to win and rule the country. They represented a historic turning point: ‘the first legitimate, peaceful changeover in the Italian political system, decided by the electorate and accepted by the losers’ (Pasquino, 2002: 19). But the elections were especially crucial for FI, which obtained 10,923,146 votes, 29.4 per cent, equivalent to more than 50 per cent of the votes gathered by the Casa
delle libertà (House of Freedoms), the new name of the centre-right coalition. FI won 187 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 83 in the Senate. In contrast to 1994, there was also a considerable gap between Forza Italia and the second national party, the Democratici di Sinistra, DS (Democrats of the Left), which got only 16.6 per cent of the vote. As a result, FI became the largest party in Italy, ‘capable of establishing itself anywhere and everywhere’ (Diamanti, 2003: 90) (see Table 14.1).

Over the years, the party showed an unstable trend, registering an increase in its membership from 139,546 to 312,863 from 1997 to 2000, and a drop to 190,000 members in 2006 (Raniolo, 2006; Paolucci, 2007). The party carried out the important function of rooting itself throughout the country thanks to FI local representatives at regional, provincial and municipal levels, according to the model of a franchising party (Carty, 2004). Consequently, FI local representatives preserved a high degree of autonomy from the centre without any strong organizational structure able to connect the periphery with the centre.

Forza Italia’s success was also due to Berlusconi’s politics of alliance. In 2001, the first bipolar election in Italian history took place under the slogan ‘united we can win’: the fracture between the Lega Nord (LN) and the centre-right coalition was therefore repaired (Di Virgilio, 2001). The League, once again allied with FI and AN within the Casa delle Libertà (House of Freedoms) with a clear, shared programme to which all subscribed, governed throughout the 2001–6 legislature, as was expected. The other coalition partners were Biancofiore (Whiteflower), the Centre Christian Democrats (CCD), and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the New Italian Socialist Party and the Italian Republican Party. In total, the cabinet consisted of 84 people, with 14 ministers, nine of them without portfolio, and five technical ministers. In order to guarantee stability in government coalition, key posts were assigned to the leaders of majority parties.

The second Berlusconi government will be remembered as the longest in the history of the Italian Republic, exceeded only by his fourth government (16th legislature). However, severe tensions emerged between the prime minister and the parties in the coalition (Cotta, 2002; Campus, 2002). Government policymaking was affected by external factors as well as by ‘sudden and unexpected events’ (Cotta, 2002: 180), such as the economic crisis and, after September 11, a new international scenario. In addition, in recent years, this led to the radicalization of relationships with trade unions, especially the CGIL. It also triggered a twofold coordination problem for Berlusconi, the first within the party, concerning the relationship with the peripheral structures, the second within the coalition and the government.

Signs of crisis became more evident after the results of the European and the regional and local elections held in 2004 and 2005 respectively. The outcome of this negative trend was the resignation of the Berlusconi government and the formation of a new one: the so-called Third Berlusconi government (23 April 2005). The 2006 general election marked a slim victory for the centre-left led by Romano Prodi. Berlusconi’s centre-right performed better than expected and came closer to returning to power. This outcome was arguably due to the new electoral law, which entailed a proportional system with a majority bonus (known as the Porcellum Bill). Berlusconi questioned the legitimacy of the election, stressing its irregularities and making a strong challenge to Prodi’s victory by mobilizing his supporters (Donovan, 2008).

Only two years after the rise to power of the centre-left under the Prodi government, the centre-right took its revenge. The announcement and creation of a united centre-right party, Partito del Popolo della Libertà (the People of Freedom Party, later renamed simply as Popolo della Libertà (PDL)), enabled Berlusconi to reassert his role as an innovative leader. The idea of a single party within the right was not new, it was raised without success within the CDL, but it was only in 2009 that it was realized, favoured by a more competitive political framework.
Berlusconi was, therefore, able to respond to the creation of the single centre-left party Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party), under Walter Veltroni’s leadership. Whereas DS and Margherita merged following a so-called ‘cold fusion’, Berlusconi looked for direct popular involvement in this process. In the end, UDC refused to join PDL and only AN and other small centre-right parties did.

This strategy was rather successful in attracting media attention and in paving the way for Berlusconi’s triumph. Table 14.1 shows that the PDL won a fairly impressive 37.4 per cent (1.3 per cent more than the combined votes gained by FI and AN in 2006), compared with 34 per cent for the PD; the nine-point gap between the two coalitions (PDL + AN + LN vs PD + IDV) was unprecedented compared with the rounds of voting in the history of the Italian Second Republic (Corbetta, 2009: 81). The 2008 election highlighted a bipolarism characterized by the reduction of fragmentation and by the enduring dominance of the right over the left (ibid.: 91). Nevertheless, political competition was still radicalized, both between the parties and within the ruling coalition and the PDL. Likewise, the conflictual relationship between the judiciary and other state institutions caused an institutional stalemate.

Berlusconi is dead. Long live Berlusconi (2011–13)

Some of the events that occurred after the 2008 election were largely unexpected. Although the fourth Berlusconi government enjoyed high levels of support and solid majorities in both parliamentary chambers, after three years the strength of the majority coalition was threatened by internal conflicts (between PDL and LN) and disagreements within the ministerial team (between Berlusconi and Tremonti). Gianfranco Fini subsequently withdrew from the PDL to form a rival centre-right party, Futuro e Libertà (Future and Freedom). Moreover, by the end of 2011, the international credibility of Berlusconi and his government was damaged by a long series of scandals and the increasing anti-European attitude adopted by the prime minister. This, in turn, alienated the PDL from its electorate, the business world and traditionally conservative Catholic voters. Over the years the relationship with the opposition, with Italy’s largest trade union federation, the left-wing CGIL, as well as with the President, the Constitutional Court and the judges had become highly antagonistic. Against this background, the political crisis under the pressure of the global financial speculations reached its peak.

The inability to find a suitable successor to Berlusconi negatively affected the stability of Italian politics and even of the PDL itself. The leaders of coalition government parties were unable to deal with the events whilst the opposition showed a low degree of coordination (Diamanti et al., 2012). The only solution to managing the political, fiscal and, once again, moral crisis of the country was the formation of a fully non-partisan and technical government, led by Mario Monti (16 November 2011), supported by the president of the Republic, with the approval of European institutions (e.g. the European Commission and the European Central Bank) and international bodies (e.g. the IMF). Monti’s government introduced emergency austerity measures backed by a large parliamentary majority, except for Lega Nord and Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values) following a model of party cartelization (Katz and Mair, 1995).

The consequences of these changes within the Popolo della Libertà were rather ambiguous. The choices made by Angelino Alfano, appointed secretary of the party, were not independent and were often undermined by Berlusconi himself, as in the case of holding primaries in the PDL, often announced on television, but in practice denied by Berlusconi even prior to the official declaration that he would be running for prime minister again. In addition, whereas the PDL took a strong stance against corruption scandals involving its staff in the regions of
Lombardy and Lazio, within parliament the party delayed the approval of an anti-corruption bill. The summer of 2012 was characterized by internal conflicts, with Berlusconi expressing his willingness to change the name and identity of the party, his decision to return to the electoral race, growing scandals around him, as well as the threats of defections from former AN members.

This period was well described by a PDL member: ‘We are all on the run, but no one knows where to go’ (Corriere della Sera, 3 October 2012, p. 13). In this political landscape, Berlusconi’s return was more about the implosion of, and the dramatic loss of support for, the PDL. This was also an answer to the centre-right electorate, strongly affected by the Monti government’s austerity policies. However, Berlusconi’s return was not entirely unexpected and many observers in Italy suspected that it had been orchestrated from the beginning. Tensions with the judges – with verdicts of uncertain outcome expected in the early months of 2013 – influenced the electoral campaign, where the search for a prospective rather than retrospective vote prevailed.

Against this background, the 2013 elections produced a significant change in the Italian political system. The Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S, the Five-Star Movement), led by the popular comic actor Beppe Grillo performed far better than the major parties, PD and PDL, standing as Italy’s single largest party. The PDL obtained 21.6 per cent of votes, about 14 percentage points down on 2008 and reached only 29.2 per cent with its coalition partners. On the other hand, the centre-right alliance lost 18 percentage points compared with 2008, as well as its control over its traditional strongholds, Lombardy in the North and Sicily in the South. Certainly, Berlusconi prevented the collapse of the PDL and the centre-right coalition, but this was mainly due to declining support for its rival party, the PD, rather than its own growth (Diamanti, 2013).

That makes it hard to read the PDL result as an unquestionable victory. The PDL is no longer the party of change, as this role is taken by M5S, nor is its future clear, while the leader appears weakened by new scandals (he was accused of having bribed Senator Di Gregorio to bring down Prodi’s government in 2008) and the verdicts of the trials. After the 2013 elections, Italy is a special case of floating party systems (Rose and Munro, 2010), similar to Eastern Europe. In November 2013, after the split with Alfano and the other PDL ministers (who have subsequently formed the New Centre-Right), Berlusconi then created a new Forza Italia, orienting it towards anti-European positions and a radical opposition to the government led by Letta. There is a paradox here: Berlusconi has been one of the main actors in the birth of the bipolar system, albeit polarized and imperfect, but he seems no longer able to guarantee it. Twenty years after the ‘Clean Hands’ investigation, the crisis of the parties and the party system is contributing once again to making the Italian political situation highly unstable.

The parable of neo-Fascism: from ‘custom clearance’ to extinction

The earthquake caused by the Tangentopoli scandal brought a decisive change in the country’s political system. The neo-Fascist MSI, which since 1971 had been excluded from any local or national government because of its distinctive illegitimate identity (Chiarini, 1991), emerged as the front-runner against the left dominated by former Communists. Silvio Berlusconi subscribed to this view by endorsing the candidacy of the MSI leader, Gianfranco Fini, as mayor of Rome.

After its unexpected success at 1993 municipal elections, the party started moderating its approach by enforcing the process of integration into the democratic system, which it had started long before but never completed. The moment had come to modify its name, symbol and strategy.
in order to set up a larger coalition of the right. As a result of these changes, a new label, *Alleanza Nazionale*, was adopted, even if this change was not well accepted by all its middle-level elite and supporters (Tarchi, 1995b and 1997).

### Allies and competitors (1994–99)

Forced to look for cooperation, the party, unused to this practice, had early difficulties in relations with its new allies. Because of the veto by the Northern League, the National Alliance was unable to join the Pole of Freedom in Northern Italy and had to run its own list at the 1994 general elections. By contrast, in other regions it joined FI along with the CCD, under the Good Governance Pole. Despite this difficulty, the success of the MSI-AN was clear: 13.5 per cent of the votes, 109 deputies and 48 senators (see Table 14.1).

The AN’s first foray into government with five ministers and twelve secretaries and the question, raised especially abroad, over the so-called ‘rebirth of Fascism’ pushed Fini to actively try to transform the party’s neo-Fascist image by dropping its original ideology. The Congress held on 25–29 January 1995 sanctioned the end of MSI and the birth of *Alleanza Nazionale*.

In fact, at the very beginning there was an identifiable continuity between the MSI and the AN (Ignazi, 1994a). Having changed its status as a pariah party (Tarchi, 1995a) and following their leader’s decision, almost all members accepted the new situation. Only one of the historical leaders, Pino Rauti, opposed this decision and founded the *Movimento Sociale–Fiamma tricolore*, which gained only very modest support. Fini tried to emphasize the originality of this transformation. The manifesto launched by the Fiuggi Congress claimed to ‘embrace the democratic values that Fascism had denied’, but it was not enough to achieve AN’s political legitimation at large. The new positions of the party still showed consistent traces of MSI illiberal imprinting (Griffin, 1996; Ignazi, 1998; Baldini and Vignati, 1996) and intended solely to ‘create the illusion of a core change in ideology and programs’ (Ignazi, 1994b: 856).

According to the data from a survey conducted among party delegates (Bertolino and Chiapponi, 1999), they displayed contradictory political attitudes towards the past which had inspired the creation of the MSI. The political parties that formed the first Berlusconi government returned to opposition in early 1995. Overshadowed by the personality of Berlusconi, AN gave new priority to concerns about differentiating the *Alleanza* from its allies. Assuming that *Forza Italia* could quickly fall apart, AN progressively moved to more moderate positions, showing that the policy of the Italian right was oriented toward the centre (Ruzza and Fella, 2009), although an inner faction, *Destra sociale*, continued the traditional political culture of the MSI. Despite its allies’ attempts at mediation, AN called for early elections, thus obtaining a good result (15.7 per cent), but as a result of its competition with MS-FT, the centre-right was defeated.

From that moment onwards, AN openly competed with FI. Rifts arose mainly over the reform of the judiciary and other institutions. The new party ideology, presented at the 1998 Programmatic Conference held in Verona, advocated liberalism in the economy and assumed conservative positions on ethical issues, a strategy aimed at attracting moderates. According to Fini, the era of anti-communism and ideological conflicts that had plagued the nineteenth century was over, whereas Berlusconi stressed his strong aversion to communism (Chiarini and Maraffi, 2001). At the same time, AN established a cooperation with some former Christian Democrats and members of the Radical Party to promote a referendum on the electoral law which culminated in the formation of a joint list at the 1999 European elections. The poor outcome of both initiatives confirmed the failure of an isolation strategy and reinforced confrontational stances within the party.
**Governmental right (2000–5)**

The crisis of the centre-left governments relaunched the necessity of unifying the opposition. Despite the harsh confrontation in previous years, AN did not refuse an alliance with the LN and it led to the centre-right coalition’s victory in the main regions in April 2000. Its hopes of drawing voters away from Forza Italia waned (25.6 per cent vs 13.1 per cent, as Table 14.1 shows), but AN acquired a higher number of regional councillors and assessors, and gained the presidency of Lazio and Abruzzo. The increase in the number of party representatives in local government and the progressive professionalization of its cadres favoured a transition from a party of true ‘believers’ to one of ‘careerists’ (Panebianco, 1988). Notwithstanding the dramatic increase in the official number of members to 467,539 in 1995, the party was characterized by an emphasis on its presence ‘in public office’ rather than ‘on the ground’, through a large number of promotions to positions of power in the public sector. It was even clearer that the positions expressed in the AN programme documents presented at the Naples conference of February 2001 with the leitmotif of the ‘Destra di governo’ aimed at shifting towards moderate tendencies (Tarchi, 2003).

After the 2001 elections (AN 12 per cent, FI 29.4 per cent), the AN acquired ministerial positions in Berlusconi’s government and the nomination of its leader as deputy prime minister. Fini tried to affirm himself as a serious and responsible conservative politician, now distancing himself from his old dream of reviving a ‘Fascism of 2000’ (Negri, 2010). He was appointed as the official representative of the Italian government at the European Convention, endorsed the military attack against Iraq and, while taking a hard line on law and order (repression of the anti-G8 protesters in Genoa, use of ‘very severe’ punishments for drug dealers), assumed more ‘progressive’ positions. In 2003 the party leader launched a proposal to provide legal immigrants with the right to vote at local elections, revised previous positions on ethical issues, opening up to some libertarian options, retracted his statement on Mussolini, whom he called in 1994 ‘the greatest Italian statesman of the twentieth century’, and, during his visit to Jerusalem, he defined Fascism as an ‘absolute evil’ because of its racial laws. Fini’s image as leader of a modern and moderate right-wing force was highlighted after his appointment as foreign minister in November 2004. However, the fact that, together with the Lega Nord’s leader Umberto Bossi, he had signed a bill on stricter immigration regulations gave the members of the European People’s Party cause for reservations about the prospect of the inclusion of AN’s MPs in its parliamentary group in the Strasbourg Assembly.

The break with the past was carried out mainly by the party leader but among its members the picture was less clear, since in some cases they displayed political attitudes close to the traditional MSI both in terms of authoritarian values and in their evaluation of the Fascist regime. Despite increasing its external attractiveness by emphasizing the new course of its programme, the political positions adopted by the party reflected only the choices of a restricted inner circle of party leaders. AN was governed according to the principle of ‘plebiscitary centralism’, in which the party leader had almost absolute power over the internal decision-making bodies, appointed half of its members in the National Assembly and exerted full control over financial resources. The president also violated the party statute which stipulated the need to organize a conference every three years, whereas only three conferences took place from 1995 to 2009. This, however, did not prevent the flourishing of internal factions that competed for hegemony within the party, though Fini’s leadership was never questioned, and sought to influence ideologically the AN’s official position. This explains why the programme presented at the 2002 National Party Congress was drafted by a committee made up of representatives of the three internal factions of the party.
Fini adopted the strategy of ‘divide and rule’, but such divisions raised notable friction within the party. His clear statement on the ‘absolute evil of Fascism’ provoked uproar amongst the members and resulted in the departure of Alessandra Mussolini, who founded *Alternativa Sociale* (an umbrella coalition of extreme-right parties, including *Forza Nuova* and *Fronte nazionale*), and some public expressions of dissent among senior party leaders. The poor performance of the centre-right in the 2005 regional elections, at which the House of Freedoms won only in Lombardy and the Veneto – thanks to the Northern League – increased these difficulties.

**The risks of ‘cold fusion’ and the diaspora (2006–13)**

The disagreements within the coalition suggested that the centre-right should present itself at the 2006 elections with a better articulated formula, emphasizing the specific programmes tabled by FI, AN and CCD. The defeat left room for Fini to make efforts to move towards the centre, with the purpose of obtaining membership of the EPP, even at the cost of causing the exit of the populist wing of *Alleanza Nazionale*, loyal to the MSI heritage, led by Francesco Storace, who founded a new party *La Destra* (which got 2.4 per cent of votes at the 2008 general election, as Table 14.1 shows). Fini’s strategy was overshadowed by Berlusconi’s invitation to merge all the forces of the centre-right into a single party, *il Popolo della Libertà*. Whereas at first Fini had strongly opposed it, then, under the pressure of elections just around the corner and the fear of loss of votes, he agreed to run on a joint list. After the success of the new strategy promoted by Berlusconi, Fini organized a purely formal third congress of the party and announced both the dissolution of the AN and its merger with the PDL.

The ‘cold fusion’, despite the entry into government with four ministers, the election of Gianni Alemanno as mayor of Rome and Fini’s appointment as president of the Chamber of Deputies, worsened previous rifts and created new ones. Within the PDL, a party without its own political identity and centred on Berlusconi’s personal leadership, Fini was, for the first time in twenty years, no longer the only party leader. His reiterated anti-Fascist statements contributed to distancing him from most former leading members of the AN, who never accepted his ideological repositioning. Incorporating party officials and members into the new party proved hard to implement because of their failure to share a common organizational structure. Furthermore, the decision that 70 per cent of political positions and electoral candidatures would be granted to FI members, whilst only 30 per cent would be reserved to former AN members, highlighted the inequality of treatment of both founding parties by increasing conflicts within the party.

Between 2008 and 2010, relations deteriorated between Berlusconi and Fini, who, by taking advantage of his institutional role, complained about the PDL’s political choices and Berlusconi’s personal behaviour. In the end, Fini broke away from Berlusconi, who had become more intolerant of his ally’s criticism, and quit the PDL at the April 2011 National Committee of the PDL; but only 44 MPs and a limited number of local councillors followed him. Yet, Fini’s attempt to reunite all his former followers and thus force Berlusconi to resign as head of the government failed. Fini’s *Futuro e Libertà* (FLI) appeared as a betrayal not only of Berlusconi but also of many members originally from the MSI. The new party experienced internal troubles because of its poor performance in the run-up to local elections and was weakened by defections. A willingness to build a central pole in a hypothetical ‘Party of the Nation’, including the UDC and another moderate party, *Alleanza per l’Italia*, combined with a strong support for the Monti government, did not prevent the rapid decline of Fini’s party. At the general election of February 2013, FLI got a disastrous 0.4 per cent of votes, which meant it
was no longer represented in Parliament and was condemned to becoming an irrelevant political actor.

The FLI was not the only victim of the neo-Fascist diaspora. Fini’s controversial behaviour brought internal divisions among his fellow members. Within the PDL most of the AN leaders loyal to Berlusconi were marginalized and their presence reduced in the electoral lists. Others, led by former ministers La Russa and Meloni, formed a new, more nationalist and right-wing party, Fratelli d’Italia, with the unavowed purpose of recreating the former National Alliance, which with 1.9 per cent got only nine MPs. La Destra did even more poorly, scoring only 0.6 per cent. The lists of the Radical Right – Forza Nuova, CasaPound, MS-Fianna tricolore – together took only 0.4 per cent of votes (see Table 14.1). Research suggests that many former MSI followers shifted their vote to the populist movement headed by Beppe Grillo. Twenty years after Tangentopoli, the tide that had brought the ‘National Right’ from the margin of politics to the centre of power has now reached a very low ebb, leaving behind the remnants of a long and controversial history. The inability to preserve its own distinct identity amongst its allies, as well as in the eyes of its opponents, has destroyed the ambitions raised by the collapse of the old party system in 1993.

Conclusions

After a long period of isolation caused by its identification with Fascism, the Italian Right emerged from the ashes of the First Republic in 1993, beset by the scandals of Tangentopoli. Since there was no longer a Communist threat, a large part of the electorate expressed conservative views, albeit in rather different ways. Disappointed with the corrupt ruling class, citizens were in search of new political forces. Forza Italia was seen as appealing by anti-state ‘liberal revolution’ supporters. The MSI and AN were popular with those citizens who wanted to reaffirm law-and-order policies, to call for an increased sense of the state and respond to threats to national identity (migration, secessionist claims). The CCD and CDU were viewed favourably by Catholic traditionalists.

The success of the centre-right coalition, despite this heterogeneity of expectations and perspectives, can be explained by two factors: the persistent hostility of a large sector of Italian society against the left and the presence of a unifying leader, a successful entrepreneur, a man from civil society (systematically praised by the media for its virtues and opposed to ‘uncivil’ political society), who presented himself as a newcomer. In these conditions, enjoying the advantage of owning the most important Italian private television company, Berlusconi managed for almost twenty years to maintain control over the fragile coalition he had founded. This coalition had been repeatedly challenged by the conflicting interests and ideological aspirations of each member group: after the break-up with the Lega Nord, which was responsible for the electoral defeat of 1996, the frictions between FI, AN and CCD-CDU-UDC were frequent (Poli and Tarchi, 1999), eased only by the prospect of returning to government, and re-emerged still in the years that followed in relation to important issues such as economic policy, relations with the European Union and institutional reforms. After 2006, with the defection of the UDC and the criticism of populism launched by AN against the LN and Forza Italia, the instability of the coalition increased, but it was counterbalanced by the failure of the incoherent coalition supporting the Prodi government, torn by serious internal conflicts. The success of the centre-right at the 2008 election only temporarily mitigated internal tensions, triggered by Gianfranco Fini, sceptical about the opportunity to succeed Berlusconi as leader of PDL, but convinced, in the face of the economic crisis, of the possibility of being appointed to head a transitional government with the support of the centre-left party. Between 2010 and 2011, Fini’s expectation
The political right

was unfulfilled: the creation of the FLI was not enough to defeat the Berlusconi government in parliament, and when the weakness of the executive in dealing with the financial crisis forced the Cavaliere to resign as prime minister, Mario Monti succeeded him at the head of a technocratic government. Support for Monti’s government was far from unanimous within the PDL: the party was close to division and its parliamentary majority was gradually being eroded, but also for the FLI the alliance with the centrists did not succeed as expected.

At the February 2013 general election, the PDL lost considerable support to the Scelta civica di Monti (Monti’s Civic List), but most significantly to the Five-Star Movement, which had already at the 2012 local elections attracted right-wing voters keen to oppose the rise of the centre-left parties. The centre-right lost the election by an unexpectedly tiny margin, but the decline of bipolarism diminished its capacity to undertake initiatives, condemning it to depend on others’ actions and decisions. The proposal to form a broad coalition government with the Democratic Party, in spite of their sharp differences in ideology and in programmatic platform, was an evident confirmation of that situation. Without a new ruling class, with a leader severely damaged by legal difficulties likely to lead to convictions on a number of charges and with the ex-AN component fragmented and weakened, the destiny of the Italian Right will be influenced by factors that are difficult to control. Given that, as is shown by the polls, its potential electorate is wide, although eroded by temporary defections and abstentions, a deep process of renewal in the organizational structure and in the programmatic platform is expected to take place sooner or later. In what direction and by whom, it is rather hard to predict in the current circumstances.

Against this background, it seems that the Italian political system will find it hard to emerge from the tunnel of political transition.

Bibliography


