

No laughing matter

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What if the Aam Aadmi Party is the largest party in the next Lok Sabha? Foolish as that may sound, something not very different just happened in Italy. Few would have bet a penny on the Five Star movement when, barely three years ago, it was founded by comedian Beppe Grillo. Today, with more than 25 per cent of the votes in what were perhaps the most surprising elections in Italian history, the Five Star movement is the single largest party in the lower house.

The movement — which strongly rejects defining itself as a political party preferring, instead, to call itself a “free association of citizens” — does not have physical headquarters or a constitution (it has a “non-statute”, though). Its “offices” are hosted in Grillo’s blog and its local units were formed by the blog’s readers, who voluntarily began to organise activities related to the five issues represented by the five stars — public water, sustainable mobility, development, connectivity and environment. Each unit deals with local issues and forges links between society and local institutions. Campaigns and activities are then shared online through the blog, thus stimulating the formation of new units, the circulation of ideas and the emergence of creative solutions to a number of everyday problems. These ideas have been sometimes translated into concrete policies by the first representatives of the movement elected to local councils since 2010.

However, the most important issue that explains a lot of the movement’s success is the fight against corruption and the promise to “send home” the existing political class. The contrast between the declining economic situation of a sizeable part of Italy’s middle class in the wake of the austerity measures taken by the government in the last year and the incapability of the political class to take even small symbolic action to curb its inordinately long list of benefits, including the highest salaries in Europe, free telephones and transportation, and the richest pension scheme in the world — all kindly offered by taxpayers-electors, who in turn saw their pensions curbed, salaries frozen and the price of gas increase, not to mention abysmally high rates of unemployment — was unbearable to a sizeable part of the electorate. The anger that brought thousands of people to the streets in Greece and Spain was successfully transformed into electoral capital in an unconventional — no representative of the movement ever showed up on TV — but effective campaign that promised to revolutionise the very idea of politics in the country.

Its MPs are different from the classic image of politicians. They are young (37 years old on average, as against 55 in the previous legislature), highly educated (88 per cent are graduates) and, most importantly, none of them has ever served as an MP. They are students, nurses, small entrepreneurs, common people. They will voluntarily renounce up to 50 per cent of their salary. The money saved will be used to finance various kinds of activities modelled on Five Star representatives in Sicily’s legislative assembly, where the party created a fund for micro-credit to small local enterprises.

The movement is promoting a completely new idea of democratic representation. First, all candidates were chosen by movement activists through primary elections held online rather than by the party’s high command. Second, the MPs do not see themselves as people’s representatives, but rather as their spokespersons. Elected members will subject all important policy decisions to online referenda and will explain and justify all votes in parliament through daily broadcasts on YouTube. Third, all MPs will be allowed to contest elections only once and they will propose a bill to make ineligible whoever has served for more than two legislatures. There was little else the exhausted Italian

electorate needed to hear.

The challenge, now, is to turn from a protest movement into a governing party. Important shortcomings in terms of internal democracy and Grillo's absolute power in terms of non-appealable sanctions (expulsions) might constitute a serious constraint in the political arena. The genesis of the movement was the 2007 V-day — V for vendetta, V for “vaffanculo” (an Italian expletive) — which was attended by many citizens. By unhinging the Italian political system, it seems they have had their vendetta. Now it is time to stop saying vaffanculo and rule the country.

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