

The risky allure of Italy's Five Star Movement

The populist party is not a credible contender to govern the country

The Five Star Movement is an anti-establishment party that has long threatened to change the landscape of Italian politics. In mayoral elections at the weekend it scored its biggest success yet, taking control of two of the country's largest cities, Rome and Turin. These victories are a blow to Matteo Renzi, Italy's centre-left leader, at a difficult moment in his premiership. He needs to find fresh momentum after these defeats if he is to consolidate his power and press ahead with the economic reforms that are necessary.

For years, the Five Star Movement has been dominated by its founder, the comedian Beppe Grillo, and his rants against the euro and immigration. But Mr Grillo recently left the scene and the party is now showing a new face to voters. In Rome its candidate, a 37-year-old lawyer called Virginia Raggi, has become the first female mayor in the Eternal City's history. In Turin, Chiara Appendino, a 31-year-old business graduate, easily defeated a prominent rival on the centre-left. Although Mr Renzi is a young premier, Italian politics and business remain dominated by middle-aged and elderly men. The personal success of the two women in breaking into a male-dominated bastion is to be welcomed.

The Five Star Movement's performance largely reflects the determination of voters to protest against the government after years of sluggish growth, stagnant wages and high unemployment. The party is also popular because of its strong stance against corruption, which remains endemic. This was an especially resonant issue in the contest for Rome, where the council is heavily in debt and where some politicians face allegations of criminality.

Even so, the party founded by Mr Grillo is still a long way from being a credible contender at the national level, not least because of its incoherent

economic policies. It is in favour of a universal basic income but sets out no explanation on how to pay for it. It advocates a referendum on membership of the eurozone, an event that would be highly destabilising for Italy and Europe. Its fiscal policies are focused on lowering taxes and raising spending. This is something Italy cannot afford; national debt is at 132 per cent of gross domestic product.

The big question after these mayoral polls is how Mr Renzi will respond. Given that the next general election is two years away, the results will not seem immediately threatening. But the prime minister is set to hold a plebiscite on constitutional reform in October that aims to overhaul the country's gridlocked legislature. Mr Renzi has staked his future on the result, saying he will resign if he loses. This outcome now looks entirely possible.

Mr Renzi must seize back the initiative. One regular criticism of the prime minister is that he likes to run his Democratic party like a one-man show. He should allow his allies to shine and convey the sense that he leads a strong national team. A defeat for Mr Renzi in October would be damaging for Italy. His party might be able to survive his departure and remain in government for a short while. But it would be plunged into a new bout of factional infighting and probably retreat from the reformist economic policies Mr Renzi has pursued.

The Five Star Movement will now be tested. After its victories in Rome and Turin, the party will have to move beyond its easy populist rhetoric and demonstrate that it is capable of running two of Italy's biggest cities. Success at these local polls, however, cannot make up for the failings of its policy programme. The party has introduced fresh faces into Italian politics, but it is nowhere near capable of running Italy.

