

Stefan von Kempis: Italy in Transition

When, one and a half decades ago, shortly after the end of the Cold War, the Democrazia Cristiana made its exit from Italy's political stage, a period of transition began for the country. Now, under Romano Prodi, Italy seems to return to a state of chronic instability which recalls exactly those old days. Is the country lost to progress?

Much as the swift changes of government in the days of the Democrazia Cristiana appeared systematic – it was only a façade behind which there was quite some continuity: The government always succeeded in appealing to a broad range of voters on the one hand, and in permanently excluding the Communist Party from participating in the government on the other. The daily *Repubblica* mentions two formulas which guaranteed that Italy's political system went on functioning: The Democrazia Cristiana did not force the Partito Comunista into illegality, and the Partito Comunista, in turn, refrained from revolutionary attitudes, thus remaining open to Catholics as well.

Since the end of the Cold War, of the Democrazia Cristiana, and of the 'First Republic', the 'Second Republic' has been in a crisis. What is lacking is a pre-constitutional basic consensus, which existed back then. The political diversity covered by the Democrazia Cristiana exploded, so that bigger coalitions had to be formed which consisted and still consist of components that are very difficult to harmonise. In Italy, such government alliances and their diverging forces still hobble the political system. They have caused an aversion to a policy à la Democrazia Cristiana among the population, and it is this fact which rendered possible the rise of 'anti-politicians', such as the former professor of economics, Romano Prodi, and the media entrepreneur, Silvio Berlusconi. Among the country's renowned politicians, on the other hand, they have led to a belief that Italy is 'sick' and 'has reached the crossroads'.

However, lamentations about the deficits of their own system have a long tradition in Italy, and there are some positive aspects as well: In foreign policy, the Second Republic is operating quite reliably, as shown by its stable relations with the USA or the fact that Italian politicians have played an important part in formulating the EU constitution treaty.

There can hardly be a doubt that the centre-left government of Romano Prodi is overstretched. Even so, there are some successes which contradict the theory of a paralysed system: The country is taking part in the peace missions in Afghanistan and Lebanon, tax revenues are high, and the national debt is no longer increasing. What is more, the fact that Mr Napolitano, a former communist, was elected president, and that Mr Bertinotti, who still is a communist, was elected president of parliament constitutes a reconciliation with the past which holds out some hope. It seems that the intertwining of crisis and continuity is characteristic not only of the time of the Democrazia Cristiana but also of the Second Republic.

Nor may we doubt that the current cabinet appears exhausted despite the capability it is demonstrating. The prime minister visibly finds it hard to push law projects through his heterogeneous government alliance, and a consistent line as well as a homogeneous language are both absent. 'Prodi is isolated', the press writes. The case of the former minister of finance and current vice-minister of economic affairs, Vincenzo Visco, who is said to have transferred officers in an attempt to impede investigations by the fiscal police in the so-called Unipol affair, and who almost brought about the downfall of the cabinet in June of this year, shows how difficult it has become for the prime minister to rule the country.

To strengthen the moderate forces in his team and to make them immune to the 'blackmailing' of the

radical left wing, Mr Prodi launched the merger of the two pillars of his alliance – the *Margherita* and the left-wing democrats – to form the Partito Democratico (PD). After an initial phase of euphoria, an open fight for the leadership of the new party has now flared up, a party which, similar to the Democrazia Cristiana, is supposed to be a big centre-left people's party. Mr Prodi himself announced his intention to stand for the office of head of the party in May, indicating that he is not willing to give up control over the coming political force. In fact, the *Margherita* and the DS offered him the post of 'honorary' president; however, they intend to put a secretary at his side who will be the political face of the party.

The PD, which is emerging at the moment, has not yet set a signal of unity. Rather, it conveys the impression of a disorganised left wing which is drifting apart and is hardly capable of becoming the backbone Mr Prodi desires for his government. Furthermore, the most recent local elections have damaged the project: Wherever the *Margherita* and the DS presented a joint candidate, he did not convince the voters – a lesson for the prime minister and his entire team.

'We are a country without a government but with two oppositions. A right-wing and a left-wing opposition,' the *Corriere* wrote about the split in the opposition camp. On the one hand, there is the 'House of Liberties', composed of the Forza Italia headed by Mr Berlusconi, the Alleanza Nazionale led by Mr Fini, and the Lega Nord of Umberto Bossi; on the other, there is the UDC headed by Mr Cesa and the former president of parliament, Mr Casini. That Mr Berlusconi is aiming at a swift overthrow of Mr Prodi and at early elections immediately afterwards is obvious: The sooner the elections, he probably calculates, the bigger his chance of returning to power. While the Lega Nord supports Mr Berlusconi, the UDC does not want early elections. What it has in mind for the time after Prodi's downfall is a caretaker cabinet – a path which is probably also favoured by the president. According to Mr Napolitano, the government and the opposition should concentrate on developing a new electoral legislation, which renders clear majorities possible and grants the government greater action capabilities.

As published in the daily *La Stampa*, Mr Casini, former president of the parliament, is currently trying to prompt centre-left politicians to free themselves of Mr Prodi and form a caretaker government. Mr Casini's ulterior motive may well be to keep Mr Berlusconi from taking over the government and to pave the way for new alliances, his long-term objective probably being to form a block which unites Catholics from all camps – a Catholic-inspired people's party which is also open to those trade unions and civil organisations that rely on a foundation of Christian values.

Today's opposition includes yet another group which, having already sharpened its tone in the closing phase of the Berlusconi government, is now attacking the government. Confindustria, an industrial confederation led by Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, is calling for a 'strong policy' identifiable by its ideas and projects. Mr Montezemolo, who fancies himself as the mouthpiece of the workers and small entrepreneurs, does meet with approval in Italy's society.

Given the noticeable weakness of the government and the opposition, president Napolitano is playing an important role. Again and again, he has demanded reforms. The fact that he voted against Prodi's resignation in February may hardly be interpreted as a gesture of appreciation of the prime minister's work but rather as a call on Mr Prodi himself to tackle the project of reforming the electoral legislation. The prime minister did accept the order, but fulfilling it does not seem to be dear to his heart. His lack of enthusiasm is understandable: After all, a substantially reformed electoral legislation, which aims at a functioning political system, would put at a disadvantage especially the small parties, such as the Udeur and the Italia dei Valori, whose support Mr Prodi will hardly want to abandon, given his current situation.

The government intends to launch a political offensive before the start of the summer holidays. It plans to change the labour legislation, to raise low pensions, and to increase unemployment benefits. Another point on the agenda is to strike intra-coalition deals on medium-term budget and financial planning.

The question of how long the centre-left government will be able to hold its ground, and of what will follow afterwards, remains open. Both Mr Prodi and Mr Berlusconi are always good for a surprise, and the hidden vitality of the Italian system should not be underestimated. The need to strike deals, make compromises, and safeguard with all due care the balance of power which was cultivated during the decades of the Democrazia Cristiana, has generated a political culture *sui generis* which has enabled the country to demonstrate what it is capable of at crucial moments.