

## Italy: Rise and Fall of the Networked Citizen

Over the years, the American examples illustrated earlier, and especially the MoveOn model, have become a popular blue-print of how to use digital networked media to drive political change from below. Networked citizens around the world, in places as diverse as Australia, Spain, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, Egypt and Tunisia (only to mention but a few) have imitated, adapted and improved on those models, more or less successfully.<sup>1</sup> In the following pages we focus our attention at the story of Italy's Five Star Movement, arguably one of the most remarkable and—in some respect—significant examples of the impact of networked citizens outside America. Inspired initially by the efforts of Beppe Grillo, a renown comedian-turned-blogger (and his public relations firm, Casaleggio Associati), in just a handful of years the Movement (or M5S—in its Italian acronym) has gone from being contemptuously dismissed by the ruling political parties as a farcical nuisance to winning the 2018 general election and finally govern the country. Since its very inception, the Internet has been the Movement's main communication channel and organising tool. His leaders and followers use the network to discuss and propose ideas, and set the national agenda by-passing the mainstream media (such as television or the national press) which, in Italy, have a long history of political subordination

<sup>1</sup>Coleman and Blumler 2009; Earl and Kimport 2013; Pătruț and Pătruț 2014; Vromen 2016; Chadwick and Dennis 2017.

toward the country's powerful elites.<sup>2</sup> Very much like the Obama's and Trump's examples in America, the M5S' story is important for this book for it is a cautionary tale of the Internet political potential and alarming disruptive consequences: on the one hand it embodies the strength of web-based movements to fight against hubris and party elites; while on the other hand, the story of its success sheds light on the dangerous and exploitable weaknesses hidden under the apparent strength of the networked citizen ideal. To understand the Movement, its roots, its networked citizens, and its impact on the Italian political sphere, we first need to understand the peculiar historical background that gave birth to it, the role of national media networks, and the media Tycoon Silvio Berlusconi's long-lasting grip on Italian politics between 1994 and 2012. Very much like in the American case, this is a story that begins in the 1990s. To be precise in 1992: Italy's *annus horribilis*.

1992 was one of the worst years in Italy's recent history. The country's spirit hit its nadir between May and July, when the two leading magistrates in the fight against the Mafia and their entire security detail were killed by two separate bombs in Sicily. The bomb that killed Giovanni Falcone exploded on May 23 near the small-town of Capaci, on the highway connecting the cities of Palermo and Trapani. Two months later, on July 19, Falcone's friend and closest collaborator Paolo Borsellino died when a car packed with 90 kg of Semtex-H exploded in Via d'Amelio, in the centre of Palermo. Under their leadership, the so-called *Anti-Mafia Pool* had achieved what many believed impossible in the fight against organized crime: not only had they brought hundreds of affiliates of the powerful Sicilian syndicate to stand trial, but they had also been able to secure for them lengthy jail sentences. While these weren't the first instances of the Mafia murdering a representative of the state, the scale and execution of the killings of the summer of '92 had never been seen before. Watching the images coming from Sicily on TV, millions were in shock. There was something deeply unsettling about those images, they didn't fit the picture of a country at peace. Instead, the devastation caused by the two earth-shattering blasts reminded many of a war-zone. The assassinations of Falcone and Borsellino were

<sup>2</sup>It is fair to say that the M5S's attitude towards using mainstream media to set the national agenda has changed in the recent past, especially after winning the election in 2018. The members of the movement, especially its main political representatives, appear now routinely as guests on national television news and political talk shows.

unequivocal acts of ruthless defiance of state authority. The message *Cosa Nostra* (the name by which the Sicilian Mafia is often referred to) had sent out was loud and clear: no one is untouchable. Amidst growing criticism, the state reacted by deploying an initial contingent of 7000 soldiers to Sicily.<sup>3</sup> This was the start of a massive operation of homeland security that would last for six years and eventually involve more than 150,000 officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Democracy in Italy, many thought, was at risk.

Others, however, believed the greatest threat for the country's political status quo did not come from the Mafia's reaction to the state's interference in its business, but rather from the work of another group of judges in the country's north. 1992 was also the year *Mani Pulite* (Clean hands), an investigation of the District Attorney of Milan, uncovered a deeply corrupt nationwide system that had, for decades, made bribery and kickbacks the tacit code binding together Italian politics and business interests. The investigation showed to the Italian public their politicians' thirst for money and power had no moral compass. The welfare of the people seemed to play no part in their decisions making. There were no rules that could not be bent; there were no controllers that could not be bought. Slip an envelope full of cash into the right person's pocket (especially if that pocket is a secret Swiss bank account) and you could achieve the impossible: build block of flats on lands subject to mudslides; sell contaminated blood supplies to hospitals; or pay a judge to turn a blind eye.<sup>5</sup> The Milan magistrates had opened Italian politics' very own Pandora's box only to find out that it contained worse evils than most had imagined, and no apparent trace of hope.

For many, 1992 marked the end of an era. It was a watershed moment for both the country and its people's political consciousness. The somewhat glorious past—that had seen the country renounce fascism, abdicate monarchy, embrace democracy and quickly turn the post-World War II wreckage into a social and economic miracle (becoming one of the largest economies of the world in the process)—was over. The widespread feeling that ran throughout the country during that year was an 'irresistible wave of *schadenfreude*', as perfectly put by Leonardo

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson 2000; Stille 1996.

<sup>4</sup>Serino 2003.

<sup>5</sup>Barbaceto et al. 2012.

Notte, one of the main characters in *Italy 1992*, a 2015 10-episodes political TV drama focusing on the events surrounding *Clean Hands*. The German word used by Notte perfectly captures the pleasure the majority of the country derived from seeing corrupt politicians and greedy businessmen publicly shamed. Most Italians felt betrayed and sought revenge against the crooked political class that had let the country down for far too many years. The scandal, commonly known as *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville), caused an earthquake of unprecedented force. It was so powerful and—to a certain degree—so unexpected that the foundations of Italy’s political establishment were (mostly) reduced to rubble, and had to be rebuilt from scratch.

The daily scandals unearthed by the Milan prosecutors, the violent shockwave of the bomb blasts in Sicily and the plunging economy enraged the electorate and cleared the way for a new era—the so-called *Second Republic*—to begin.<sup>6</sup> The scandal was, ultimately, instrumental in reshaping the electoral map from north to south. Parties that, for half a century, had played a very dominant role in Italian politics were wiped out. The Christian Democracy Party and the Socialist Party were the most prestigious casualties. The two had come, respectively, first and third in the general election of April 1992 (in between them only the Communists); but two years later, when a new general election was called, the Christian Democrats disappeared and the Socialists became irrelevant. At the 1994 general election Italy found itself at a political crossroad. People had the option to either hand power over (for the first time) to the Communist Party, the only major political force that had survived Bribesville’s earthquake unscathed; or choose someone (supposedly) new. The electoral outcome revealed history’s quirky sense of humour. The Communists and their ideology, whose disastrous failures were epitomised by the recent collapse of the Soviet Union, lost. The winner was a newcomer, at least in the political arena: Silvio Berlusconi, the media-tycoon-turned-politician, who has since become more renowned for his many trials (for fraud, false accounting and bribery), his unrepentant philandering and *Bunga Bunga* sex parties than for the enlightened value and financial acumen of its neoliberal policies. Berlusconi’s victory and his self-style populism have had a long-lasting impact on Italian politics since.<sup>7</sup> The rise of the networked citizen and

<sup>6</sup>Koff and Koff 2000.

<sup>7</sup>Ginsborg 2005; Gundle and Parker 1996.

the Five Star Movement in Italy is to a large extent an anti-body reaction to the malaises that the Berlusconi era brought with it.

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