

Italian politics

Mattarella takes political gamble in facing down Italy's populists

With centrists in disarray, president may struggle to find allies in new election campaign



Sergio Mattarella: 'The president of the Republic has the job of a watchdog, which has never, and can never, be ordered around' © Reuters James Politi in Rome MAY 28, 2018

With an ashen look, Sergio Mattarella emerged from his office at the Quirinal Palace in Rome on Sunday night to explain one of the most momentous events in Italy's postwar political history.

The country's 76-year-old president had just prevented the birth of a government led by the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and far-right League by [rejecting Paolo Savona](#), their Eurosceptic candidate for finance minister, on the grounds that his policies might drive Italy out of the single currency.

"The president of the Republic has the job of a watchdog, which has never been and can never be ordered around," [Mr Mattarella told reporters](#).

Until Sunday, Mr Mattarella had patiently refereed the country's political crisis, giving Five Star and the League many weeks to reach a deal. He even accepted a little-known professor with hardly any political experience, [Giuseppe Conte](#), as prime minister. If there was any criticism of Mr Mattarella, it was that he had been too lenient with the populist alliance. But now, after Mr Mattarella's stand against Mr Savona, the tables have turned.

To supporters, the soft-spoken Sicilian has established himself as a bulwark against populist rule in the eurozone's third-largest economy; to detractors, he is now the symbol of a villainous political establishment tied to Brussels.

The danger for Mr Mattarella, political analysts say, is that his gamble could backfire and strengthen Five Star and the League ahead of the snap general election expected in the autumn.

It did not help that Mr Mattarella [chose Carlo Cottarelli](#), a former IMF official, to lead a technocratic government in the interim — a solution that has long been lambasted by the two populist parties.

“The chants of protest will be even louder — the anti-elite and anti-institutional feelings will be even more accentuated,” said Sara Gentile, a professor of political science at the University of Catania.

After Mr Mattarella’s intervention, Five Star and the League ramped up their attacks on the Italian president — with some calling for his impeachment — a move reserved for high treason.

Paolo Grimoldi, a senior League official in the northern region of Lombardy, called for the removal of Mr Mattarella’s photograph from public offices. “Italian democracy has been wounded to death,” Mr Grimoldi wrote on Facebook. “The League was ready to govern with its ministers to free the country from the chains that Brussels and Berlin have put on our ankles.”

Mr Mattarella — a former constitutional court judge whose [political career](#) began in 1980 after his brother Piersanti was murdered by the Mafia — would reject any accusation that he has overstepped his powers. The Italian constitution gives him the final word on cabinet appointments, and previous presidents have used this to make changes.

In 1994, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, the president at the time, prevented Silvio Berlusconi from making his ally Cesare Previti as justice minister. In 2014, president Giorgio Napolitano forced Matteo Renzi to pick Pier Carlo Padoan as finance minister.

In those cases, it was the prime ministers who would routinely cave to pressure from the Quirinal Palace, something Five Star and the League were unwilling to do. In addition, Mr Mattarella had offered the two parties a way out — by suggesting that Giancarlo Giorgetti, a senior League MP, could get the finance ministry position — but they still would not budge.

In his statement, Mr Mattarella also suggested that the selection of Mr Savona was a betrayal of the will of Italian voters, since the election campaign had not been explicitly waged on the country’s membership of the single currency.

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“We’ve never reached such a showdown before, but Mattarella could not have done anything else,” said Sofia Ventura, a political science professor at the

University of Bologna.

Supporters of Mr Mattarella, who was elected by parliament in 2015, rushed to his defence in an attempt to shield him from the attacks. “President Mattarella’s speech represents Italy at its best,” Carlo Calenda, the outgoing economic development minister and a member of the centre-

left Democratic party, wrote on Twitter. “Let’s stay united in defence of our country and our institutions.”

But with opposition parties such as the centre-left PD and Forza Italia, the centre-right party led by Mr Berlusconi, in disarray, Mr Mattarella could struggle to find powerful allies during the next election campaign and after.

“The political forces that proposed the unborn government will go around like the sentinels of public morality, asking everyone: what side are you on?” wrote Lucia Annunziata, editor of Huffington Post Italy. “With Mattarella the traitor, or with change? With the institutions, or with the citizens? With the corrupt elites, or the people?”

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