He did it again: how Berlusconi managed to keep power in Italy

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Francesco Ricatti
Cassamarca Senior Lecturer, School of Communication, University of the Sunshine Coast

Despite not holding an official cabinet position, Silvio Berlusconi will exert a great deal of influence over Italy’s newly-formed government. EPA/Pier Paolo Ferreri

Under the leadership of re-elected president Giorgio Napolitano, a "grand coalition" of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) and the centre-right coalition of parties - headed by Silvio Berlusconi - has been sworn in as the new government in Italy.

The new prime minister, Enrico Letta, represents the conservative and Catholic faction of the PD. He is also the nephew of one of the closest Berlusconi allies, Gianni Letta.

The new government will include many important politicians in Berlusconi’s coalition, and Berlusconi, although not sitting in cabinet, will have enormous power and influence.

When considering the trials and the scandals which have plagued Berlusconi in recent years - as well as his enormous responsibilities in pushing the country to the edge of a terrible social, economic, cultural and moral crisis - one might wonder how he managed to retain power once again.
Although in the recent election he lost millions of votes, there is still approximately a quarter of Italian voters who support him. These are people who are emotionally attached to their leader; people who are still under the strong influence of the TV channels and other media controlled by him; people who despise the political left for ideological reasons; and people who are afraid to lose the (little or large) benefits they gain from a system of widespread corruption and tax evasion.

In a country where power has remained for a long time in the hands of elderly, white, heterosexual, Catholic and conservative men, Berlusconi still represents a relatively accurate reflection of the country’s socio-economic, cultural and generational hegemony. Italy has for instance often been described as a “gerontocracy” (a system of power dominated by elderly people), and it is not by chance that all the three main candidates as Presidents of the Republic (Stefano Rodotà, Franco Marini and Romano Prodi) were born between 1933 and 1939. While none of them were successful, it is no coincidence that it was an even older man, Giorgio Napolitano (born in 1925), who was.

These social, cultural and anthropological characteristics have guaranteed Berlusconi a significant number of votes even in the recent election. Still, his coalition did not win outright, and one could have expected that the two other major political groups, the centre-left coalition and the new populist movement, Five-Star Movement (M5S), would have taken the opportunity to isolate Berlusconi once and for all. How can we then explain their failure to do so?

The centre-left coalition that should have easily won the majority in both chambers made three fundamental mistakes before the election. It supported the technocratic government led by Mario Monti, which imposed extreme and unfair cuts in the name of the economic austerity imposed by Europe and by the financial markets.

Almost certain of an easy victory against Berlusconi, his political rivals underestimated his resilience. They also underestimated the emerging influence of the M5S, a protest movement led by a former comedian (Beppe Grillo), which managed to attract 25.5% of the total vote for the lower house and 23.8% in the Senate. Having run a very poor election campaign, the centre-left coalition led by Pier Luigi Bersani obtained the majority of seats in the lower house, but failed to do so in the Senate. This coalition itself is profoundly divided, between a more leftist and innovative side, and a more powerful, conservative side. Had they won the election, they could have maintained internal discipline. Not so in the current political chaos.

The M5S, however, obtained an incredible result, when considering that this was the first national election they took part in. However, such success was obtained on the basis of a populist agenda that mixed innovative ideas with demagogic propaganda. Claiming that the distinction between left and right is no longer relevant, and by calling for a revolt against all politicians, they obtained a large number of votes from dissatisfied, enraged and desperate voters on both sides of the political arena. They also insisted that their candidates be selected online by the members of the movement, with little or no attention given to the actual political and professional abilities and experiences of the candidates. As a result, they managed to elect a large number of citizens with very little experience in politics and government and with disparate political ideas, values and convictions.

As such, it was clear that M5S had no interest and ability to assume any government responsibility by seeking an agreement with the centre-left. Such agreement would have alienated many of its voters and forced their elected members to demonstrate actual political unity and leadership. They instead decided to reject any attempt of agreement, and to reinforce and consolidate their stance as the main opposition party.
The centre-left coalition found itself forced to choose between an agreement with Berlusconi and going back again to an immediate and very risky election. A new election would have almost certainly seen their defeat, or at best would have confirmed the need for a coalition with Berlusconi. Meanwhile, Italy - in need of profound and brave reforms - would have remained in a political deadlock for months if not years to come.

The result of such an intricate political situation was the implosion of the centre-left coalition, the re-election of Napolitano as president (as voted by MPs and Senators of both the PD and Berlusconi’s coalition), and the formation of a new government led by Enrico Letta. He is a younger and more palatable expression of the conservative politicians who control the PD.

The make-up of the new government includes more women, younger politicians, and the first black minister. However, most key ministries are in the hands of Berlusconi’s men and other conservative politicians. It is clear that Berlusconi has not accepted to support such government out of love for the country, and will expect a significant return. This is a government that will be under the constant political blackmail of Berlusconi and his acolytes.

Will such a government be able to bring profound and much-needed changes to Italy to fight widespread corruption, tax evasion and crime, while also proposing innovative economic and social policies? Sadly, the more democratic, modern and open part of Italian society, which always ends up being isolated and squashed between conservatism and populist protest, is not really hopeful.