

Italian politics

Italy's politicians start talks over government crisis

Democratic party sets out demands for possible deal with Five Star to exclude Salvini



Nicola Zingaretti, leader of Italy's Democratic party, outlined five conditions for supporting a new government with Five Star © AP

Hannah Roberts and Davide Ghiglione in Rome YESTERDAY

Italy's largest opposition party said it was ready for talks over joining a coalition as the country's political leaders sought a way out of the government crisis following prime minister Giuseppe Conte's resignation.

President Sergio Mattarella started two days of exploratory contacts with party leaders on Wednesday, hoping to find options for a new government after the collapse of a fractious 14-month coalition between two populist forces, the anti-immigration League and the Five Star Movement.

[Mr Conte resigned](#) on Tuesday, blaming the collapse on Matteo Salvini, the League leader and interior minister, who called for new elections and tabled a motion of no-confidence in the government.

Nicola Zingaretti, whose Democratic party could potentially replace Mr Salvini's League in a government with Five Star, said he was open to such an idea — while setting out a list of conditions for any deal.

In particular, Mr Zingaretti called for a new direction, a demand echoed by other officials. "We are not the support wheel to replace the League," said Andrea Orlando, the PD's deputy leader. "We are a political force that asks for the opening of a phase of radical change."

Italy is only a year and half into a five-year legislature and Mr Mattarella is seemingly determined to seek an early resolution to the crisis, with a bias towards staving off fresh

elections in the run-up to a difficult 2020 budget. Rome hopes to avoid another clash with the EU over public spending and fend off a big rise in value-added and sales tax.

Mr Mattarella cannot completely rule out the possibility of a reconciled League and Five Star government. He could alternatively choose to appoint a technocratic government to pass the budget and hold elections next year.

But the numbers in parliament will mean a key question for him is whether Mr Zingaretti's PD could agree a coalition with Five Star, in effect replacing Mr Salvini's League in government.

Any such potential alliance would be challenging thanks, in large part, to internal PD politics, said Emiliana De Blasio of Luiss University in Rome.

While Mr Zingaretti is the party leader, many MPs are loyal to Matteo Renzi, the former PD prime minister. Rumours that he could lead a schism in the PD, creating his own centre party, pose a threat to the stability of any government involving the party.

Mr Renzi, who was forced to resign as prime minister in 2016 after losing a referendum over parliamentary reforms, is not only problematic for many in his own party; he is also unacceptable to many in Five Star, an anti-establishment party that was deeply hostile to Mr Renzi's government.

"For Five Star any coalition containing Renzi would be an own-goal and a gift to Mr Salvini who could use it to attack from the opposition," said Luigi Curini, professor of political science at the University of Milan.

If Mr Renzi were to return to government as a minister "there would be a revolution", said Pierluigi Testa of the Trinità di Monti think-tank in Rome.

There are also deep differences in policy between the two parties, with the PD more pro-Europe and in favour of infrastructure projects such as the high speed rail link to France, opposed by Five Star.

Despite the obstacles, Francesco Clementi, a professor in the political science department at the University of Perugia, said Mr Mattarella might [lean towards such a coalition](#) because of the difficulty of the alternative.

"Ultimately it is easier for Mr Mattarella to convince Zingaretti to join a coalition than it is to convince all the other parties to go to elections, when many of the parliamentarians will lose their seats," Mr Clementi said.

Both Five Star and Mr Zingaretti's objectives could be met if the PD ministers in the government were chosen by him and did not include Mr Renzi, Mr Clementi said.

On Wednesday Mr Zingaretti set out five conditions for supporting a new government with Five Star. They included "reliable membership" of the EU — a reference to the Euroscepticism of Five

Star — and a change in economic and social policies.

Three sources said that Mr Zingaretti had held telephone negotiations with Luigi Di Maio, Five Star's leader.

Maria Elena Boschi, a PD MP and close ally of Mr Renzi, said: "For some of us, this possible coalition with Five Star could be difficult, but the interests of the country and the Italians come first and we can put personal bad feeling aside."

Five Star, which like the PD and League will formally meet Mr Mattarella on Thursday, emphasised that it still had most seats in parliament and therefore took precedence in forming a government.

"We will wait for the result of the consultations," the party said. "This is a time to respect the institutions."

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