**‘Soft revolution’ threatens Matteo Renzi’s Italian comeback**

Rivals on the left maneuver to sideline former premier.

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ROME — When Matteo Renzi decided to [trigger a leadership contest in his Democratic Party (PD)](http://www.politico.eu/article/renzi-steps-down-italy-leadership-news-democratic-party/), the former Italian prime minister knew it was a risk. But the politician once known as “Demolition Man” underestimated the risk of an open left-wing revolt.

The resulting showdown within the PD and mass resignations by left-wing opponents now threaten his ambitions to reassert control over the party, win back disillusioned leftist voters and halt a surge in support for populists. And it could upset his plans for a comeback as prime minister in general elections due by early 2018.

Renzi’s chances of winning the primaries on April 30 hang in the balance, as rival factions within and outside the PD threaten to coalesce into a single, anti-Renzi alliance. This turmoil is a sharp reversal of fortunes for a party once seen as a rare bright spot for the European left, coming at a time when mainstream parties are under threat from a populist onslaught whose potential is about to be tested in Dutch, French and German elections.

**“The referendum failure was a big blow to the PD and a huge personal defeat for Renzi” — *PD senator Giorgio Tonini***

In the short term, the split should have few consequences for the stability of the current PD government led by Paolo Gentiloni, a close ally of Renzi who was previously his foreign minister. The new political entity spawned by the schism following Renzi’s decision to force the leadership contest, called the [Progressive and Democratic Movement (DP)](http://www.politico.eu/article/italy-progressive-democratic-movement-new-party-matteo-renzi/), has pledged to support Gentiloni’s government.

The underlying challenge is to ensure that disaffected PD and DP supporters don’t continue to defect to populist groups like Beppe Grillo’s anti-establishment 5Star Movement and the anti-immigrant Northern League, the emerging force within Italy’s divided right.

“The referendum failure was a big blow to the PD and a huge personal defeat for Renzi,” said Giorgio Tonini, a PD senator and Renzi loyalist. “Renzi’s real problem now is not the dissident split, but the disconnection from a relevant part of Italian society which feels excluded and marginalized by our party.”

**Jumping from the car**

Although the schism within the center left has made a dent in the PD’s popularity, polls suggest it is just about maintaining its status as Italy’s largest political force. The PD is running just below 30 percent in the polls, neck-and-neck with the 5Stars, who have lost some momentum because of a corruption scandal in Rome, where they run city hall.

Renzi’s own entourage has been tainted somewhat by an investigation into his father Tiziano, who is suspected of attempting to exert unlawful influence over Consip, a state-owned company that manages public procurement. Tiziano Renzi denies the charges and Renzi has staunchly defended his father, but another figure close to the former prime minister — Luca Lotti, a Renzi aide and the sports minister in the Gentiloni cabinet — has also been probed for allegedly tipping off Consip management to the investigation. He too denies the allegations.

This is all potentially embarrassing for the 42-year-old who stormed to national prominence from his power base in Florence on a promise to drag the country “out of the swamp” by demolishing the old political establishment and boosting the moribund economy.

“Maybe running with two different cars will allow the center left to grow stronger” — *DP senator Miguel Gotor*

Renzi’s reputation as a reformer backfired when the electorate rejected his proposals to alter the constitution in a December referendum. [Forced to step down as prime minister,](http://www.politico.eu/article/matteo-renzi-loses-italian-referendum-exit-poll/) he then quit as party leader in a move that was calculated to accelerate a battle for the PD leadership before his rivals could get their act together.

The former premier’s hyperactivity during almost three years in power gained him critics across the PD and alienated much of the party’s left wing, who disliked his overall strategy of pushing the party further toward the center and criticized his failure to improve the situation of young Italians, who still suffer from an unemployment rate of about 40 percent. He also allowed the gap between the north and south of Italy to widen, plunging the south deeper into poverty and mismanagement, critics say.

“We don’t bear the brunt of the party split,” dissident DP senator Miguel Gotor told POLITICO. “It was an unavoidable choice, like jumping out of a car that is going to smash into a wall … Maybe running with two different cars will allow the center left to grow stronger.”

**‘We are the party’**

Renzi attempted to address these perceived shortcomings by presenting a new political and economic platform at a three-day event in Turin that ended Sunday, putting a new emphasis on youth opportunities and investments on culture and innovation.

In his closing speech Sunday, Renzi included a touch of self-criticism, saying the PD should now talk about “what has been done and what should be done better.”

“They have tried to destroy the PD. But the real game starts now,” he added, in a clear reference to the dissidents’ schism.

Despite the growing difficulties, Renzi remains the clear front-runner in the party primaries, which will be open to all Italian voters who declare support for the party. He faces two internal candidates: [Justice Minister Andrea Orlando](http://www.politico.eu/article/andrea-orlando-italian-justice-minister-challenges-matteo-renzi-for-democratic-party-leadership/) and the [president of the southern Puglia region, Michele Emiliano](http://www.politico.eu/article/puglia-president-to-challenge-renzi-for-party-leadership/). An opinion poll by Index Research put Renzi in the lead among center-left voters with 55 percent support, followed by Orlando with 22 percent and Emiliano with 20 percent.

Emiliano is an outspoken former magistrate with strong support in the poor south, who was expected to join the dissidents in the DP but decided instead to challenge Renzi from within the mainstream party. “We are starting a soft revolution of Italian politics,” he said last Thursday at his campaign launch. “We start from the south, but we want to talk to everybody,” said Emiliano, whose slogan is “We are the party.”

The other rival, left-winger Orlando, has greater credibility among PD lawmakers, which might give him a better chance of forging an alliance in future with smaller leftist parties. Orlando’s soft manner and diplomatic language are in stark contrast with Renzi’s aggressive style, which his critics say poisoned the political atmosphere.

“Renzi underestimated the referendum defeat and focused instead on defying his political adversaries,” Orlando told POLITICO. “The referendum was a turning point: Now we need to regain the confidence of that chunk of Italian society that see us as enemies.”

Whoever wins the party primaries, Italy’s current electoral rules — which differ in the lower house and the senate and lean toward a proportional system — make it unlikely that any of the main parties will secure a big enough majority to govern alone at the next national elections, raising the specter of a new political impasse.

“The result risks being an unstable government or a hung parliament, with small parties regaining huge power as part of fragile coalitions, which would bring Italy back to the old ‘First Republic,’” said Wolfango Piccoli, head of research at Teneo Intelligence, referring to the period between 1946 and 1993 that was dominated the Christian Democrats, who disappeared after the Tangentopoli bribery scandal of 1992.

If Renzi fails to keep the Democratic Party united, he risks being blamed for dialing back Italy’s political clock by more than 50 years and undermining its ability to [struggle out of anemic growth, soaring debt, troubles in the banking sector](http://www.politico.eu/article/veni-vidi-can-he-vici-matteo-renzi/) and a host of related socio-economic problems.