

Italy. Election campaign

# Renzi's struggle for allies threatens poll hopes

Loss of just a few supporters could be crucial for PD if race is as close as predicted

JAMES POLITI — ROME

Italy's centre-left Democratic party is struggling to forge political alliances before Italy's election, a situation that could narrow its path to victory as polls predict a tight contest in March.

The party, led by former prime minister Matteo Renzi, hopes to maintain its grip on government but is hampered by dwindling poll numbers and a damaging rift with leftwing dissidents who formed a rival party last year.

The challenges for the PD were highlighted by tensions that flared this week with Emma Bonino, a political veteran who leads the More Europe movement. Ms Bonino, a natural ally of Mr Renzi's party on civil rights as well as foreign policy, said she might run separately rather than in coalition.

"We found ourselves in the midst of an imbroglione," Ms Bonino said in Rome yesterday, after days of sparring with PD officials inside and outside the government over the technicalities of Italy's new electoral law.

While Ms Bonino risks being left out of parliament if no deal is struck with Mr Renzi, the PD stands to lose the support of a political force worth about 1 per cent of the Italian vote, which could be pivotal in a tight race.

Five Star is leading national polls ahead of the PD. A centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi, the former prime minister, could also win if it performs strongly.

Analysts say Mr Renzi — nicknamed "the Demolition Man" for his combative approach — burnt bridges with potential partners during his three-year premiership, which ended when his constitutional reforms were defeated in 2016.

"[Losing Bonino] would be seriously damaging for the PD: it needs allies but cannot find them," said Mattia Diletta, a professor of political science at La Sapienza University in Rome. "Bonino is important because she offers a



All aboard: Matteo Renzi arrives to catch a train at Rome's Tiburtina station. His PD party has fallen out with Emma Bonino, below  
 Alberto Pezzi/WAF/Getty

stamp of credibility with some key voters."

Italy's election promises to be a big event on the European political calendar, given the strength of the populist opposition and the country's economic and financial vulnerability, making it one of the eurozone's weakest links.

Ms Bonino, 69, led the campaign to legalise abortion and divorce in Italy in the 1970s and as a member of Italy's Radical party championed global civil rights battles. The pro-European politician was a EU commissioner in the 1990s and Italian foreign minister under Enrico Letta's government in 2013.

Lately, she has championed the rights of migrants to Italy and the need for greater EU integration at a time of growing nationalism. Since the PD is the only staunchly pro-EU party on the Italian political landscape — which is now dominated by Eurosceptic opposition parties ranging from Five Star

to the Northern League and Mr Berlusconi's Forza Italia party — it was a natural partner for Ms Bonino. The meeting of minds between the PD and Ms Bonino was reinforced in recent years by PD-backed legislation to allow civil unions for same-sex couples and living wills for patients.

However, there have been some tensions over the PD's inability — or unwillingness — to press ahead with a controversial citizenship law for the Italian-born children of immigrants.

Losing Ms Bonino would be the latest blow to attempts by Mr Renzi to widen his party's tent.

Angelino Alfano, a centrist coalition partner and the current foreign minister, has said he will not stand for another term, leaving Beatrice Lorenzin, the health minister, as the PD's only real centrist ally. But there were tensions between Ms Lorenzin and the PD as well this week, over the choice of her logo, which was contested by some within Mr Renzi's party. "The PD risks being left

"The PD risks being left alone, and the fault is only its own"

Beatrice Lorenzin

alone, and the fault is only its own," said a spokesperson for Ms Lorenzin.

Giuliano Pisapia, the former mayor of Milan and a possible PD ally on the left, also said he would not run for parliament, leaving a handful of his associates as the only leftwing coalition partners for Mr Renzi.

Although the numbers involved in these minor alliances are small, a few extra seats could be important in a finely balanced election, as the PD jostles to see if it could form a government or participate in a coalition.

The rift between Ms Bonino and the PD involved a disagreement over the speed and scope of the signature collections required to get More Europe on the ballot in coalition with the PD.

The dispute appeared to have been resolved yesterday after Bruno Tabacchi, a centrist MP, agreed to allow More Europe to compete in the election on his list. However whether they will be able to forge a new agreement with the PD remains to be seen.

