

# POLITICAL LIMBO: WHAT NEXT FOR RENZI, ITALY?

**ROME:** The final countdown to the end of Matteo Renzi's time in charge of Italy was under way Wednesday amid frenzied negotiations over what comes next for a country in political limbo. Ironically, Renzi's rule was set to come to an end with his govern-

ment winning a vote of confidence in the Senate, the parliamentary chamber he tried to emasculate via a referendum in which he suffered a crushing defeat on Sunday. The confidence vote was expected as a means of curtailing prolonged discussion

on the approval of Italy's 2017 budget-an unfinished task which prompted President Sergio Mattarella to ask Renzi to delay his departure for a few days.

Meanwhile, two major questions were exercising Italians over their morning cappuccinos: Will

there be early elections? And what is to become of Renzi? Renzi's destiny looked set to be clearer after a meeting of the executive of his Democratic Party (PD) yesterday. Renzi remains the leader of the centre-left party but it is beset by internal divisions that were painfully exposed by the referendum battle. As PD secretary general, Renzi controls the party apparatus, which he used to stage the coup that deposed his successor, Enrico Letta, in February 2014.

#### Push for early election

Analysts see the party machinations playing out in one of two ways. Either enough of Renzi erstwhile allies decide he is damaged goods and he is toppled. Or he survives as leader and reasserts his authority as a precursor to staging a comeback bid at the next elections. An election must be held by February 2018 but opposition parties are clamouring for it to be held up to a year early, saying the referendum was effectively a vote of no confidence in the centre-left coalition.

"Either we have immediate elections or we take to the

streets," Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right Northern League, warned yesterday. "We cannot make a mockery of the 32 million people who voted on Sunday." After the budget deliberations are completed, Renzi will go back to see the president and formally complete the resignation process.

This could happen later Wednesday or be delayed until Friday, Thursday being a public holiday in Italy. Renzi is reported to favor a February 2017 election, calculating that the PD remains well-placed to emerge with the largest share of the vote, despite the upward trend in backing for the populist Five Star Movement.

#### Recipe for paralysis

Led by comedian Beppe Grillo, Five Star is skilled at pitching an eclectic message to all shades of opinion-from libertarian leftists and ultra-environmentalists to anti-euro and anti-immigration eurosceptics. The last year has seen Five Star emerge decisively as Italy's biggest opposition force, largely at the expense of 80-year-old Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, with around 30 percent of voters likely to back the movement.

Backing for the Northern League has been largely stable at around 15 percent of voter intentions, and Five Star's hopes of power are seen as being restricted by its reluctance to countenance alliances with other parties. The major obstacle to holding an election in two months' time is that parliament must first revise the rules by which it will be held.

As things stand, two different electoral laws apply to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, which hold equal powers under the "perfect bicameral" principle upheld by the referendum. A new system for the Chamber of Deputies, under which the party getting the most votes would be guaranteed a majority of the seats, was approved earlier this year. But all the parties had agreed to revise it before the referendum. The Senate meanwhile is elected by a proportional system unlikely to give any one party or coalition a majority. Elections under two different systems would be a recipe for political paralysis, most observers agree. Crucially, reports say Mattarella shares that view. —AFP



**ROME:** A view of the Italian Senate in Rome yesterday during a confidence vote on the 2017 budget law. —AP

# TIME NAMES TRUMP ITS 'PERSON OF THE YEAR'

## 'PRESIDENT OF THE DIVIDED STATES OF AMERICA'

**NEW YORK:** Time magazine yesterday named Donald Trump its "Person of the Year" for 2016 for his stunning upset election victory that rewrote the rules of politics, delivering him to the helm of a divided America. The president-elect dialed into NBC television's Today show, welcoming the accolade as a "very, very great honor," denying he was responsible for divisions and praising outgoing Democratic President Barack Obama.

The real estate tycoon, who has never previously held elected office and shocked the political establishment by defeating his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton, is featured on Time's cover described as "Donald Trump: President of the Divided States of America." The magazine said its person of the year, a tradition that began in 1927, "had the greatest influence, for better or worse, on the events of the year."

"So which is it this year: better or worse?" editor-in-chief Nancy Gibbs wrote. "The challenge for Donald Trump is how profoundly the country disagrees about the answer." She said 2016 had been the year of his rise and 2017 would be the year of his rule, after he is sworn into office on January 20. "Like all newly elected leaders, he has a chance to fulfill promises and defy expectations," said Gibbs.

Trump won the title, she added, for "reminding America that demagoguery feeds on despair and that truth is only as powerful as the trust in those who speak it, for empowering a hidden electorate by mainstreaming its furies and live-streaming its fears, and for framing tomorrow's political culture by demolishing yesterday's." In the past Time has showed its editorial teeth by naming sinister figures Adolf Hitler in 1938 and Joseph Stalin both in 1939 and 1942.

The president-elect told NBC's Today show that he thought the sub-heading on the front cover about a divided America was "snarky" and denied that it was his fault. "I'm not president yet so I didn't do anything to divide," he said, despite having inflamed the country by campaign rhetoric disparaging women, illegal immigrants and Muslims among others.

#### Takes Obama's advice

For years he criticized Obama and was instrumental in the so-called "birther" movement that questioned whether the first black president was born in the United States. "I will say this: I've now gotten to know President Obama, I really like him," Trump told NBC on Wednesday. "I can't speak for him, but we have a really good chemistry together. We

talked," he said. "He loves the country, he wants to do right by the country and for the country and I will tell you, we obviously very much disagree on certain policies and certain things, but I really like him," he added. The billionaire even said that he discussed some of his possible appointments with the outgoing Democratic president. "I take his recommendations very seriously and there are some people that I will be appointing and in one case have appointed where he thought very highly of that person," Trump said.

Clinton, the former secretary of state who became the closest in history to becoming America's first female commander in chief, was named the runner-up, with computer hackers in third place. The former first lady won the popular vote with around 2.7 million more votes than Trump, but the Republican won the crucial Electoral College by 306 to 232. Trump campaigned hard on a promise of bringing back jobs with the old manufacturing heartland hard hit by companies fleeing overseas and taking jobs to cheaper labor markets in China or Mexico.

Trump told Time in an interview that he asked Apple CEO Tim Cook to build in the United States "a great plant, your biggest and your best, even if it's only a foot by a foot bigger than some place in China." He also addressed representing working class Americans despite his lavish wealth, living in a luxurious Manhattan penthouse. "I'm sitting in an apartment the likes of which nobody's ever seen. And yet I represent the workers of the world. And they love me and I love them," he told the magazine. "I think people aspire to do things. And they aspire to watch people. I don't think they want to see the president carrying his luggage out of Air Force One. And that's pretty much the way it is," he said. —AFP



**This photo obtained courtesy of TIME shows US President-elect Donald Trump as Person of the Year cover. —AFP**



**NEW YORK:** KT McFarland, Deputy National Security Adviser for President-elect Donald Trump, right, watches as Michael Flynn, President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for National Security adviser, center, takes a selfie with Sukhwinder Sangha of Vancouver, Canada, left, at Trump Tower. —AP

## WORRY AS TRUMP SECURITY CHIEF FUELS CONSPIRACIES

**WASHINGTON:** On issues of national security and intelligence, no one is likely to have more influence in Donald Trump's White House than retired Gen Michael T Flynn. Yet Flynn, Trump's incoming national security adviser, has gained prominence in Republican politics by fueling conspiracy theories and Islamophobic rhetoric that critics warn could create serious distractions - or alienate allies and embolden enemies - if it continues.

"His job is to ensure that the White House is focused at all times on all of the threats that the United States faces abroad," said Julianne Smith, a former deputy national security adviser to Vice President Joe Biden. She said she was "deeply troubled" by a Flynn tendency to promote fake news stories on his Twitter feed. "You don't want to have a distracted national security adviser," said Smith, who now directs the strategy and statecraft program at the Center for a New American Security.

She was among several national security experts who raised concerns Tuesday about Flynn's willingness to share bad intelligence on a social media feed as he prepares to move to the West Wing. Flynn served until 2014 as the head of US military intelligence. Although he left that job over disputes with the Obama administration over policy and his management of the Defense Intelligence Agency, he is widely regarded as a top intelligence officer, a job that requires an understanding of the power of disinformation.

#### Fake news

The issue of sharing fake news was highlighted when Flynn's son, Michael G. Flynn, tweeted about the false idea that prompted a shooting at a Washington pizza parlor. He had been promoting a conspiracy theory that Hillary Clinton's allies had been operating a secret pedophilia ring in the restaurant and noted it would remain a story until "proven to be false." Vice President-elect Mike Pence acknowledged Tuesday that the younger Flynn was helping his father with scheduling and administrative items during the presidential transition but told CNN "that's no longer the case."

Asked repeatedly whether a security clearance was requested, Pence refused to answer directly. "Whatever the appropriate paperwork was to assist him in that regard, Jake, I'm sure was taking place," he said. Trump's team did not clarify whether Michael Flynn Jr.'s departure from Trump's transition team was related to the tweets. Less than a week before the election, the elder Flynn tweeted a link to a story that falsely claimed Clinton emails contained proof of money laundering and sex crimes with children, among other illegal activities. The incoming national security adviser called the baseless story a "must read" and instructed his followers: "U decide."

Flynn also promoted conspiracy theorists, some of them white supremacists, throughout the campaign even as he emerged as Trump's highest profile national security adviser. He encouraged his followers to read a book by Mike Cernovich, whose website has suggested Clinton's campaign chairman was part of a "sex cult with connections to human trafficking." Flynn also tagged white nationalist Jared Wyand, whose website is popular with "alt-right" followers.

Flynn's appointment is not subject to Senate confirmation. Rep Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House intelligence committee, said Tuesday that Flynn's willingness to promote fake news "raises profound questions about his suitability for this important position." Trump's team did not respond to questions about Flynn's social media activity. Pence praised Flynn more broadly on Tuesday, even as he distanced the incoming administration from Flynn's son.

#### 'Wealth of experience'

"We are so grateful and honored to have Gen Flynn as our nominee for national security adviser. He brings an extraordinary wealth of experience," Pence said. The role of national security adviser has varied by administration, but usually centers on coordinating the policy positions of the secretaries of state and defense, the attorney general and other members of a president's team.

It is an especially important position because of the national security adviser's access to the president in the West Wing of the White House. Flynn's office will be steps away from the Oval Office, proximity that allows him to act as a gatekeeper on a wide range of issues, including matters of war and peace as well as diplomacy and intelligence.

He is expected to have more direct access to the president than national security officials in the Cabinet. Aside from attending Trump's daily intelligence briefings and senior staff meetings, Flynn will also oversee the National Security Council, a White House department that has grown to about 400 people involved in making policy recommendations.

Flynn, who turns 58 in December, served for more than three decades in the Army. "If the national security adviser is going to be the direct conduit between the president and the national security world, of course it's a concern that that adviser is being taken in by conspiracy theories and fake news," said Tom Nichols, a professor at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, where Flynn obtained a master's in national security and strategic studies in 2001. Whoever has the president's ear on international affairs, Nichols said, should have "a firm grip on what's true and what's false." —AP

# PARIS CHOKING UNDER WORST WINTER POLLUTION IN DECADE

**PARIS:** Paris choked yesterday under its worst winter pollution in a decade, with commuters enjoying free public transport and half of the cars ordered off the road in an effort clear the air. The surge in pollution has been driven by cold weather and near windless conditions that have trapped car exhaust, wood smoke and other pollutants, said the French capital's AirParif air monitoring service.

Though bad by local standards, current levels of fine airborne particles known as PM10 in Paris are around 60 percent of levels in notoriously polluted Beijing and a fraction of readings in New Delhi, known as one of the world's most polluted capitals. City authorities announced a second day of traffic restrictions, with a ban imposed on private cars with registration plates ending in even numbers from between 5:30 am (0430 GMT) and midnight.

They imposed the same restriction on cars with odd-numbered plates on Tuesday. Public transport in the city was also free for a second day running to encourage commuters to leave their vehicles at home, while school children are being prevented from exercising outside. "This is a record period

(of pollution) for the last 10 years," Karine Leger of AirParif told AFP by telephone.

For more than a week now, Airparif has published readings of PM10 at more than 80 microgrammes per cubic meter of air particles, triggering the pollution alert. It recorded the highest level of pollution last Thursday, reporting 146 microgrammes/m3. Other parts of France were also facing pollution alerts, with the air particle concentrations rising to dangerous levels in the south-east and the north of the country. The central city of Lyon was suffering as pollution gathered in the Rhone Valley, also affecting the Alpine towns of Chambéry and Annecy.

#### Fines for motorists

The environmentalist candidate in next year's presidential election, Yannick Jadot, said that politicians needed to target the most polluting vehicles and restrict the use of diesel engines. "We have politicians who tell us they are looking after our health," Jadot said. "The reality is that when they have to choose between traffic, diesel and our health, unfortunately they don't choose our health."

This is only the fourth time Paris has

resorted to traffic restrictions to cope with air pollution. The region's officials took similar measures in 1997, 2014 and 2015. But a parliamentary report has questioned the efficacy of the restrictions, arguing that they do not target the most polluting vehicles. Despite the measures on Tuesday, officials reported heavy traffic jams in and around the city in the morning and evening rush hours.

Traffic police were kept busy trying to enforce the anti-pollution measures, fining more than 1,700 motorists for violations. Paris police chief Michel Cadot warned the traffic restriction might be kept in place for a third day. He called on commuters to limit their car use or organize car sharing to minimize traffic pollution. Adding to the region's problems, the Paris rail link to its main airport, Charles de Gaulle, has been out of action since Tuesday morning after an accident brought down power lines, forcing more people to take to the road. State rail company SNCF said Wednesday they hoped to reopen the line by 1500 GMT. The air particles being measured can cause and exacerbate a range of respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses. —AFP