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SUBJECT: Italy: A Look Ahead

Italy may be troubled by economic uncertainty and widespread violence, but Italian politics have been surprisingly ~~almost eerily~~ short of sound and fury for months. There is a good chance, moreover, that this ~~unaccus-~~ ~~toned~~ calm will persist through the presidential election that will be held in December 1978. The calm is more apparent than real, however: important events are taking place, and they are no less important because they are occurring behind the scenes rather than in public clashes between parties. The chief issue remains the same: should the Italian Communist party be given a larger and more formal role in the running of the country? As the governing Christian Democrats search for ways to escape their deepening involvement with the Communists and the Communists press for further concessions, their maneuvering promises to produce some fundamental changes in the workings of Italian politics.

The Persistent Stalemate

Italian party leaders have had to adjust to sudden and unexpected changes in the political equation during the last three years. The first shock came in 1974, when a national referendum produced a landslide victory for legalized divorce, suggesting that the influence of the Church-oriented Christian Democrats was threatened by secular trends in Italian society. Confirmation came a year later when the Communists surprised themselves and their rivals by scoring unprecedented gains in nationwide regional and local elections. Then the major question became: would Italian voters trust the Communists with as much power at the national level? The answer came last year when the Communists won even more votes in the parliamentary election; their 34.4 percent left them just 4 points behind the Christian Democrats.

When the Christian Democrats were forced after the election to seek Communist abstention in parliament to install the Andreotti government, they billed the arrangement as a temporary expedient--one designed to give the country a government until it became possible to

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return to the "normal" relationship between majority and opposition. The precarious balance that produced the Andreotti government has persisted, however, and Andreotti--now well into his second year in office--has already exceeded by 5 months the average lifespan of post-war Italian governments. In this period, the Christian Democrats have made virtually no progress toward convincing their traditional Socialist allies to rejoin the government--the only way the Christian Democrats can untangle themselves from the Communists. And while the Communists have gained significant concessions--influential legislative positions, a formal say in key government policies--they have yet to make a breakthrough decisive enough to propel them into the national government.

With the parties so deadlocked, most political leaders seem agreed on the desirability of avoiding disruptive public battles. This was most evident in the recent decision to postpone an important round of local elections that would have taken place this month. With 10 percent of the voters scheduled to go to the polls--the largest number since 1976--the elections were shaping up as a significant test of relative party strengths. But the limited options available to the parties would have hindered efforts by any of them to turn a substantial gain in votes to political advantage. And in any event, the tension of an election campaign would have posed a threat to the Andreotti formula--which is still seen by party leaders as the only alternative to another general election. Most politicians prefer to avoid a general election now, because it would probably aggravate the situation by producing a further gravitation of the electorate toward the Communists and Christian Democrats.

The postponed local elections will now be held at the same time as another set of municipal contests in May or June 1978. ~~Putting the elections off until spring leads to several conclusions:~~

- ~~the elections will be an even more meaningful test of voter sentiment because nearly a third of the electorate will be involved;~~
- ~~--the outcome is less likely to have immediately disruptive consequences, however, since it will occur near or during the last six months of President Leone's term--the so-called "white semester," beginning on June 24, during which the president cannot dissolve parliament and schedule a new election;~~
- ~~--another parliamentary election is thus unlikely before the spring of 1979, i.e., several months after a new president has taken office. The parties could push for an election before the "white semester" but will be reluctant to risk everything in a~~

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general contest when the spring local races offer a safer test of their standings;\*

--with little prospect for a national election and with no viable alternative to the Andreotti formula, the political game will be keyed increasingly to the presidential election of December 1978.

### Presidential Politics

Although the presidential contest is still more than a year away, it is not too soon to begin considering how it might effect the outcome of the Christian Democratic-Communist confronto.\*\* Influential politicians from several parties are likely to vie for the post; among the Christian Democrats--party president Aldo Moro, Prime Minister Andreotti, and senate president Amintore Fanfani; among the Socialists--former party chief Francesco De Martino and possibly EC commissioner Antonio Giolitti; among the smaller parties--Republican Party president Ugo La Malfa.

These men are attracted to the presidency partly for prestige reasons, but chiefly because the Italian head of state has substantial powers--greater than in most West European parliamentary systems--that have yet to be fully utilized by any holder of the office. Some presidents up to now have simply taken a narrow view of the job, while the attempts of others to assume an activist role have ultimately gone awry--for reasons ranging from illness to the politically dominant role of the parties. This time the opportunities--and perhaps the need--for activism will be greater.

The Italian president is commander in chief of the armed forces and president of the Supreme Defense Council--a policy-making body that includes the prime minister, the chief of staff, and the ministers of foreign affairs, defense, industry, commerce, and treasury. When a government falls, the president chooses a new prime minister-designate. As in

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\*Rumors have begun to circulate suggesting that the Christian Democrats may pressure Leone to resign in June to avoid the "white semester." Some Christian Democrats apparently believe that once they no longer have the option of an early parliamentary election they will be under increased pressure from the Communists.

\*\*The word most frequently used in Italy to describe the current relationship between the Christian Democrats and Communists. Confronto, which seems to have no English equivalent, connotes a somewhat greater sense of antagonism than does "dialogue" but much less of an adversary relationship than does "confrontation."

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other parliamentary systems, he promulgates the laws, but the Italian president may refuse and ask parliament to reconsider; he is then obliged to promulgate the law only if the chambers reapprove it. The president can call parliament into special session, dissolve it and call for new elections, or refuse to dissolve it when requested. As president of the Supreme Court of Justice, he has the potential to exert substantial influence in the administration of justice--an increasingly important field in view of the sharp rise in crime and political violence during recent years.

Politicians who want to become president in 1978 will face a common problem: it will be harder than ever to get elected without the support of the Communist Party. The Italian president is chosen by an electoral college consisting of the 952 members of parliament and 58 representatives of the 20 regional governments. As the second largest party in parliament since 1953, the Communists have nearly always played a significant role in the presidential election, and have supported the winning candidate in three of the six contests held since 1948.

Communist influence in the process is bound to grow as a result of the sharp gains scored in parliamentary elections since Giovanni Leone became president in 1971. For example, Communist support will for the first time be necessary to elect a president on the first three ballots--which require a two-thirds majority. The simple majority needed to win thereafter could be put together without the Communists, but just barely; the divisions within Italian parties and the tendency of some factions to act independently will make a victory without Communist support extremely difficult.

This fact has both immediate and long term implications for the political competition between the Communists and Christian Democrats. In immediate terms, for example, the reluctance of leading candidates to alienate the Communists gives the party a tactical advantage as it tries to pry further concessions from the Christian Democrats and other parties. The broader significance of the contest results, however, from the likelihood that the present political impasse will persist at least until the election.

When the new president is sworn in, Italy will probably still be balanced delicately between political eras. Just as today, the main protagonists are likely to agree that the traditional political formulas no longer apply but to be unclear about what should come next.

In such an atmosphere, the Italian presidency could become a more influential post, particularly if occupied by someone with Moro's oracular tendencies or Andreotti's tactical skill. President Leone emerged as a --

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compromise candidate when such political heavyweights deadlocked in 1971. ~~Never a major figure in the Christian Democratic party, Leone has been a marginal participant in the dramatic events of recent years and has practically been a lame duck since rumors linking him to the Lockheed payoff scandal began to circulate last year.~~

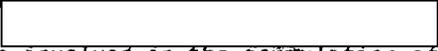
But a widely respected leader with a strong political base could use the powers of the presidency to play a key role in determining when and how the current political impasse is resolved. By his various decisions, by the tone he sets, and through his consultations with party leaders, an activist president could help tip the balance toward or away from the Communists.

The president's role could become especially significant if the Christian Democrats conclude over the next year or so that the Communists can no longer be kept out of the government. Such a conclusion is by no means out of the question; indeed, one of Italy's most prominent political scientists suggests that the Christian Democrats' desire to hold on to the presidency will be the factor that finally leads them to strike a deal bringing the Communists into the government. In that event, the Christian Democrats would probably try to soften the public impact by stressing the president's constitutional role as a balance between the branches of government and casting him as the guarantor of Italy's republican institutions.

#### Backstage Sparring

By ensuring that the presidential contest will be the next potentially decisive event on Italy's political horizon, the major parties have bought a lengthy period of time to sort out their options. During this period, the Communists will be seeking to further neutralize anti-Communist sentiment and to consolidate and expand their formal role in the governing process.

Communist chief Berlinguer's recent response to some critical questions from the Catholic hierarchy is the latest example of the party's effort to ease lingering misgivings about its plans. In a letter to a prominent bishop, Berlinguer asserted in essence that the Church had nothing to fear from the Communists; he denied that the party planned to eliminate Catholic schools and other religious institutions in areas it governed and asserted that religious faith and membership in the Communist Party are not incompatible.

 most of the top Communist leadership was involved in the formulation of Berlinguer's letter and that the final text was approved by both the secretariat and the directorate. Berlinguer

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[ ] views the result as one of the party's basic documents, designed to appeal to voters over the heads of Christian Democratic leaders.

Berlinguer's comments have provoked the most intense and sustained political debate since his 1973 call for an "historic compromise" between Communists and Christian Democrats. While the Church has responded skeptically to Berlinguer's claims, it has clearly left the door open to further confronto. ~~Some prominent members of the Church hierarchy apparently believe the Communists are changing for the better and want to keep pressure on the party by publicly challenging it to clarify the various contradictions in its doctrine.\*~~

While working to dampen fears about the party's ultimate intentions, the Communists will be trying to gradually broaden the scope of their formal role in policy making. During a recent parliamentary debate on foreign policy, for example, the Communists maneuvered the other parties backing Andreotti into supporting a joint resolution on foreign policy.

This resolution merely expressed support for a variety of non-controversial goals but it was significant as the first instance of formal agreement between the Communists and other parties on foreign policy. Thus the Communists cite it as evidence that the programmatic agreement reached by the government with the Communists and other parties last summer has been expanded to include foreign policy--a step the Christian Democrats strenuously resisted during the original negotiations.

The Christian Democrats play down the incident, claiming that the foreign policy statement was not negotiated at a high level in either the government or the party. But even if the resolution was essentially a parliamentary mishap, the relatively relaxed reaction to it speaks volumes about the changing attitudes toward the Communist Party. Just two years ago, a rumor that the Communists were prepared to abstain in a vote on the national budget was enough to set off a furor in the Christian Democratic Party; voting together on foreign policy then would have been completely out of the question.

As important as such symbolic advances are to the Communists, the party is likely to spend more time over the next year working quietly to increase its actual influence in the governing process. Few items will have a higher priority on the party's agenda than its effort to ensure full implementation of a recent law authorizing a sweeping transfer of powers and patronage to the 20 regional governments. The Communists have a vital stake in the matter, because they now participate directly

\*The Church is pressing the party to confront in particular the contradiction between various articles of its constitution which stipulates, on the one hand, that one can belong to the party irrespective of race or religion and philosophical conviction and, on the other, that members must subscribe to and implement Marxist-Leninist teachings.

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in 6 of the regional governments and have some kind of consultative role in 8 others.

Under the new law, the regions are scheduled to assume a myriad of governmental functions in fields such as agriculture, education, tourism, and public assistance. Although these powers were given to the regions by the 1948 constitution, it was not until 1975 that parliament passed the necessary enabling legislation--which in turn gave the government two years to work out a decentralization program.

The program was finally announced last summer--a parliamentary committee chaired by the Communists played a key role in shaping it--but a host of technical problems has held up the transfer to the regions of authority and funds to assume their new responsibilities. Behind the scenes, the Christian Democrats and Communists are still haggling over fine points that will affect the actual amount of patronage and power flowing to the regions. The game is far from over, but chances are that during the next year--the transfer is supposed to be completed by early 1979--the Communists will absorb many jobs and powers that have always been the preserve of the traditional governing parties.

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### Time Counts

The Christian Democrats' strategy for coping with all of this seems to center on the hope that time is on their side--and working against the Communists. In essence, the Christian Democrats hope that the Communists, like the Socialists before them, will have their uniqueness destroyed by growing involvement in the governing process and that the party will eventually suffer electorally from the contradiction inherent in its effort to remain a "party of struggle" while becoming a "party of government."

At first glance, it appears that the Christian Democrats might be on the right track. The Communist Party is experiencing its most disruptive internal debate of the postwar period, and the costs in terms of internal unity have been heavy. The Communists' young supporters seem disenchanting, while many of the party veterans feel angry and betrayed by Berlinguer's policies. His overture to the Church, for example, is seen by many in the party as one in a series of expedient moves which are gradually robbing the party of its identity. The party's membership drive is flagging, and its union leaders are chafing under the restrictions that Communist political aims place on organized labor--in which the Communists remain the dominant party.

But the other side of the coin is that the Christian Democrats--whose electorate breaks down along roughly the same socio-economic lines as the Communists--face many of the same problems.\* Their labor leaders are equally angered by the government's austerity policies, and Christian Democratic traditionalists are as unhappy as the Communist

\*The most recent research on Italian voting patterns shows that the two parties have become strikingly similar in this respect. The socio-economic profile of the Communist electorate (with comparable figures for the Christian Democrats in parentheses): Unskilled workers and farm laborers, 41.6 percent (32 percent); skilled workers, farmers, 25.8 percent (31 percent); white collar workers, shopkeepers, artisans, small businessmen, 21.3 percent (22.5 percent); businessmen, executives, professionals, 10.8 percent (14.5 percent).

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base with the growing cooperation between the two parties. ~~The squabbling among Christian Democratic leaders about how to cope with the situation is, if anything, noisier and more intense than in the Communist Party. And Christian Democratic leader Zaccagnini seems much less firmly in control of his party than Berlinguer.~~

The Christian Democrats, moreover, cannot safely bet that the various dilemmas plaguing the Communists will lead to a decline in their electoral support. The Christian Democrats, as a party that has remained Italy's largest for 31 years--despite its interclass makeup and its constant occupation of government--are well aware that governmental responsibility does not have to lead to electoral decline. There is still no force on the left mounting a credible challenge to the Communists, so that despite their dissatisfaction, Communist supporters may have little choice but to stick with the party. Other factors--superior organization, the secular trends in Italian society--should also help the party hold its own at the polls.

But perhaps the greatest potential pitfall for the Christian Democrats is that suggested by a leader of their largest faction in comments on last summer's program accord. He expressed a fear that in implementing the agreement, the two parties are creating a "new culture, without an explicit debate, without the necessary clarity." In short, running the country for an extended period through such ad hoc cooperation is gradually making acceptable routine out of procedures that were once unthinkable. To the extent that that happens, the pressure to return to a system less open to the Communists will diminish.

Such pressures in fact already seem to be receding as a result of the widespread impression, at least in the key northern industrial areas, that the various improvements in the economy--falling inflation, a reduced balance of payments deficit, a stable lira--can be traced to the understanding reached by the Communists and Christian Democrats under Andreotti.

The one development that could most likely delay or derail the trend toward closer relations between the two parties--a Socialist decision to rejoin the government--still does not seem to be in the cards. The Christian Democrats continue to pay lip service to the "essential" position of the Socialists--they are the only party large enough to give the Christian Democrats a non-Communist majority--but few political leaders seem to take seriously the possibility of a new Socialist-Christian Democratic partnership. The Socialists are still staggering from their failure to

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gain any ground in the last election, after operating for two years on the assumption that distancing themselves from the Christian Democrats would reverse their sliding fortunes. While the Socialists have been caught up in factional feuding, the Communists have gradually acquired the image of a moderate reformist party, leaving little political space for the Socialists. Some optimists in Italy still cling to the hope that the Socialists will be able to recover, but at this point the party seems on its way to joining the ranks of smaller ones, like the Social Democrats, Republicans and Liberals, who have all become marginal participants in the political game."

In any event, none of these issues seem likely to come to a head before the presidential contest is seriously underway. At that point, however, the parties will be under increasing pressure to make choices--and their choices could do more than anything since the 1976 parliamentary election to chart the future course of Italian politics.

One of the presidential hopefuls, veteran Republican leader La Malfa, has been arguing for some time that the arrangement existing under Andreotti has all the disadvantages and none of the advantages of the "historic compromise," i.e., that the Communists are able to enjoy considerable influence without having to bear an equal measure of responsibility for government actions. According to La Malfa, the Communists' policy plans and their commitment to democracy should be tested by allowing them to participate now and by forcing the party to commit itself unmistakably to specific remedies for Italy's problems.

If, as seems likely, the political stalemate drags on--with no solution in sight and with the Communists continuing to inch toward power--more Italian leaders might begin thinking like La Malfa. In short, it would not be surprising if, as the presidential election draws near, key Italian politicians stop thinking so much about how to keep Berlinguer's party out of government and begin thinking more about how to bring it in--with the least amount of domestic and international trauma.

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