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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
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MEMORANDUM

ITALY: PARTY RELATIONS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Introduction

During recent months, observers of Italian politics have focused mainly on national developments--the Andreotti government's collapse the efforts to form a new government, and now the impending national election. In many instances, however, local political trends have reflected, or sometimes even foreshadowed, the interparty tensions which led to these developments at the national level. Local political developments during the past several months illustrate two general trends: the weakening of Christian Democratic - Communist cooperation and increased Socialist ambivalence toward both larger parties. These factors have already immobilized a number of key regional administrations (and will threaten others unless relations among the parties improve at the national level). Meanwhile, there are signs that the composition of local governments could become a bargaining chip in the current maneuvering to form a new national government.

General Trends

The impressive Communist gains in the 1975 local and 1976 general elections--both times the party won more than a third of the vote--greatly improved the party's standing and contributed to the impression that Italy's pressing economic and social problems cannot be treated effectively

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the Office of Regional and Political ~~analysts.~~

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without Communist assistance. The Communists' subsequent decision to support a Christian Democratic minority government at the national level--in return for an understanding that they would be consulted on major policy decisions--encouraged a trend toward similar cooperation in many local administrations.

Communist gains in areas where the party had been weak gave it the leverage to work out formal consultative arrangements with Christian Democratic - led governments--in return for Communist support in local legislatures. And in traditional Communist strongholds, the party's gains led not only to an increased number of Communist-Socialist coalitions, but also to some instances of Christian Democratic support for such governments.

These arrangements seemed fairly stable until recently, but in the last few months the same factors that have soured interparty relations at the national level have begun to affect local politics. The Communists have been particularly anxious about the possible revival of Christian Democratic cooperation with their former Socialist allies. Consequently, the Communists have sought to work out more formal alliances with both parties in the regions where Communists dominate; elsewhere, they have increased their demands to participate fully in administrations they support. The Socialists have become increasingly concerned that Communist - Christian Democratic cooperation will weaken their party's political importance. They have recently attempted to be more independent in local government affairs by backing away a bit from the Communists without becoming too closely linked to the Christian Democrats. For their part, the Christian Democrats are reconsidering various commitments to cooperate with the Communists and are refusing to grant them new concessions in local administrations. Some of the Christian Democratic leaders apparently hope the growing differences among the parties will provide an opportunity for the Socialists to rejoin them in regional coalitions.

Regional Variations

The "Red Belt": The Communist Heartland

The Communists have been predominant in the north-central regions of Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany (Toscana), and Umbria throughout the postwar period. They have traditionally governed in these regions in coalitions with the Socialist Party. Communist gains in the 1975 regional elections allowed the party to put together similar leftist coalitions in three additional regions: Piedmont (Piemonte), Liguria, and Lazio.

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Emilia-Romagna is a special case. With more than 48 percent of the vote, the Communists are stronger there than in any other region, and they have used that position to work out a unique arrangement under which the Communist-Socialist government formally negotiates its program with the Christian Democrats, who are then pledged to support it in the regional assembly. This is a reversal of the arrangement that has governed Christian Democratic - Communist relations at the national level for most of the last two and a half years. Last fall, Communist efforts to reaffirm and expand the program agreement with the Christian Democrats met with stiff resistance from the latter, who threatened to withdraw their support. They apparently were concerned that the arrangement would become institutionalized--and might further blur party distinctions with respect to local administrative policy.

During the past several months, the Socialists have been eager to antagonize the Communists--especially in Tuscany--on isolated but controversial issues such as the Communists' equivocal position on the questions of Soviet dissidents and the presence of Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia. Because the Socialists are reluctant to jeopardize their relationship with the Communists in Tuscany--the Socialists have offices and influence in this region that outweigh their electoral strength--they refuse to make a definitive break. For their part, the Communists have refused to make administrative policy changes in the Socialists' interest. The Communists in some Tuscan towns have even stripped uncooperative Socialists of their municipal offices to emphasize this point.

The Communists in Sicily, Lombardy, and the Northeast:
One Foot in the Door

Although different in most other respects, these regions are linked by one key political attribute: they have all had regional administrations led by Christian Democrats, allied with the Socialists and some smaller parties, which enjoy Communist support. The Christian Democrats apparently agreed to these arrangements merely to bring the local situation into line with developments at the national level. The Communists view this cooperation as a step toward their eventual full participation in these administrations.

The Communists are clearly preparing to escalate their campaign for full coalition status in these regions. Early this month, for example, they withdrew their support from the Sicilian regional government after the Christian Democrats and their allies refused such a request. The regional government then resigned, opening a crisis that is not likely to be resolved before the one in Rome.

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The Socialists have also timidly indicated their willingness to put some distance between themselves and the Communists in these areas. They are apparently prepared to support the Palermo city administration in Sicily (Sicilia) despite Communist opposition and to block changes in the Lombardy (Lombardia) and Venice (Veneto) regional program agreements proposed by the Communists. But in the city of Milan--where the Socialist mayor remains in office at the pleasure of the Communists--the Socialists show no inclination to irritate their allies.

The Communists in Calabria, Campania, and Apulia:
Prying the Door Open

Tensions among the three parties have been most pronounced in these southern regions. The Communists have had less influence in these regional administrations, even though they have formed part of the majority supporting their legislative programs. In recent months, the Communists have labeled the administration of each region ineffective and have withdrawn their support to emphasize their demands for full participation. They have also declared that adjustments in the programs would be inadequate, but have accepted an offer to lead a regional program control commission in Apulia--which would greatly increase Communist influence in the planning and distribution of funds--even if the party remained excluded from the administration. A similar arrangement proved ineffective in Calabria, and the Christian Democrats remain unwilling to offer such concessions in Campania. The Socialists hold the balance of power in both these provinces, but continue to support Communists' demands rather than risking exposure to Communist attacks by siding with the Christian Democrats in these three-month-old disputes.

Outlook

The withdrawal of Communist parliamentary support for the Andreotti government two months ago virtually eliminated local party initiatives to overcome interparty tensions. And most such efforts are likely to remain stalled until the impasse at the national level is broken.

At the national level, the renewed Communist insistence on direct participation in the Cabinet and the Christian Democrats' refusal to meet these demands are the most serious barriers to compromise. Since the Socialists refuse to support any government that excludes the Communists, it is unlikely that a formula acceptable to the parties can be reached without an early election.

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Even an election might not overcome these difficulties. But a vote that does not appreciably change the Italian political equation in numerical terms--the current prediction--could reinforce the impression that only a renewal of Christian Democratic - Communist cooperation offers a way out. Thus, the parties might eventually have to reconsider compromises they have already rejected.

(One solution, which was never specifically offered by the Christian Democrats nor rejected by the Communists, is a pledge of greater cooperation between the parties at the local level, that is, full Communist participation in regional administrations in the south, Sicily, and the northeast. This alternative would probably be part of a larger compromise that included some independent leftists associated with the Communists in Cabinet posts and a greater role for the party in national government policymaking and implementation.)

(It is uncertain whether local Christian Democrats would resist or obey directives from the national party to surrender some administrative authority to the Communists. Since interparty tensions reappeared first in the localities--where they are frequently more aggravated--they probably cannot be submerged so easily.)

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