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ITALIAN POLITICAL SITUATION: THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT PARTY CONGRESS

1. The 14th Christian Democrat(DC) Party Congress took place in Rome from 15 to 20 February. Despite expectations that the Congress would be a turning point in Italian politics the outcome was largely inconclusive. No decision was reached about a new Party Secretary to succeed Signor Zaccagnini, and the election has been put off until a meeting of the Party's National Council starting on 5 March. The Congress has, however, pointed the way towards a harder line towards the Communists on the part of the DC. Signor Cossiga had a personal success at the Congress; but the position of his government is, if anything, even weaker than before, since the Socialists declared immediately after the Congress that the truce was over and that the government could no longer count on Socialist abstentions for its survival.

2. The main issue before the Congress was the question of the DC's relationship with the Communists (PCI). In his opening speech Zaccagnini reiterated his usual call for a dialogue with the PCI, which he said should be conducted without prejudice on the part of the DC: PCI entry into government should not automatically be excluded, but it should be made conditional on PCI performance in certain key areas (NATO, the economy, terrorism). The same line was taken by Andreotti, who repeated his suggestion that the PCI might be offered a step forward in local government. The overall mood of the Congress, however, was against making any concessions to the Communists. A loose alliance was formed between the leaders of the centre and right of the party, who, with varying degrees of emphasis,

/rejected the possibility

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rejected the possibility of any agreement with the PCI and stressed the need to give priority to the DC's relationship with its traditional partners, starting with the Socialists. This grouping included, among others, the large central "Doroteo" faction headed by Piccoli (current Party Chairman) and Bisaglia (Minister of Industry), the mainly working-class and Trade-Unionist "Forze Nuove" faction led by Donat Cattin (Vice-Secretary), the followers of Rumor and Colombo (both former Prime Ministers) and, on the right, the followers of Forlani (former Foreign Minister) and Fanfani (President of the Senate). These groups, which together made up about 58% of the Congressional votes (as compared with about 42% for the combined followers of Zaccagnini and Andreotti), agreed on a common preamble to the resolutions which are to be put to the National Council next month. The final line-up thus represented something of a defeat for the Zaccagnini-Andreotti line, and an indication that the next Party Secretary will have to take account of a majority view in the Party that, at least for the time being, the DC should have no truck with the PCI.

3. As for the question of who the new Party Secretary should be, the leadership shied away from a potentially divisive vote of the whole Congress (such as occurred at the last Congress in 1976 when Zaccagnini defeated Forlani) and remitted the whole question to the smaller and more manageable National Council. The front runner for the job at this stage is thought to be Piccoli, who was the key figure in the formation of the majority at the Congress. (If Piccoli had gone the other way, as at one stage seemed possible, he would probably have carried enough of the "Doroteo" faction with him to ensure that the Zaccagnini-Andreotti line prevailed). Another possible candidate is Forlani, who made a notably conciliatory speech at the Congress. Even Cossiga is spoken of as a potential Secretary, though he made clear in a letter to Zaccagnini at the start of the Congress that he would prefer to remain as Prime Minister. It would in fact be theoretically possible to combine both offices (as Fanfani and, before him, De Gasperi did in the past). But Cossiga's

/reluctance

reluctance is probably perfectly genuine, and it is thought that he would only agree to be drafted if no other solution could be found.

4. International issues, as so often in Italian Party Congresses, played a relatively small part in the proceedings, and many speakers made no reference at all to Afghanistan. An honourable exception was Cossiga, who robustly reaffirmed his government's condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and its commitment to NATO and friendship with the United States (for which he was cheered). He also urged the PCI to clarify its relations with the Soviet Union, though (in common with other speakers from the left-wing "Base" faction to which he belongs) he supported Zaccagnini's call for a dialogue with the PCI and other parties as the necessary way forward out of the present political stale-mate.

5. Where does all this leave the Cossiga Government? The implications of any internal changes within the DC will be easier to assess once the new Secretary has been elected. But for the time being it is clear that, whoever the new DC Secretary may be, the Socialists (PSI) have built up such a head of steam behind their threats to withdraw support from the government after the DC Congress that it will be difficult now for them not to translate these threats into action. The PSI could do this at any time, for example in the vote on the Finance Bill which is expected in early March and which could conceivably be made an issue of confidence. But Craxi, the PSI Secretary, has also repeatedly said that he will not provoke a crisis "in the dark" - i.e. without some indication of what is to follow. Since any crisis in the immediate future would almost inevitably be "in the dark", this would seem to suggest that the PSI will hold off for the time being. The best forecast at this stage is still that the Cossiga Government will hang on until the administrative elections which are due in May or June. But even this looks less certain now that the deadline of the DC Congress has passed. Nor has the Congress, despite its welcome pointer towards a harder line against the Communists, come up with any indication of how this could be put into effect in terms of a new government with a stable majority in Parliament. Any possibility that the Communists might have been persuaded to abstain from opposition in Parliament has of course been reduced as a result of the harder line against them.

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