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PRESIDENT COSSIGA

SUMMARY

1. A SNAPSHOT OF PRESIDENT COSSIGA AND HIS RECENT CONCERNS ON THE EVE OF THE STATE VISIT. A HIGH AND CONTROVERSIAL PROFILE IN RECENT MONTHS AFTER FIVE QUIET YEARS. A MAN OF PRINCIPLE, LIKE MANY SARDINIANS BY TURNS IMPETUOUS AND OBSTINATE, HE FEELS PERSONALLY THE BURDENS OF HIS OFFICE. FRUSTRATED BY LACK OF VISION AND PARTISAN OBSESSIONS OF HIS COUNTRY'S POLITICS. GULF CRISIS PROBABLY HIS MAIN CURRENT WORRY.

DETAIL

2. AT THE END OF MARCH, COSSIGA TOOK THE RARE AND CONTROVERSIAL STEP OF SENDING A FORMAL MESSAGE TO THE SUPREME JUDICIAL COUNCIL (CSM) - THE HIGHEST JUDICIAL BODY OF WHICH HE IS EX OFFICIO PRESIDENT - CONDEMNING ITS RULING THAT MAGISTRATES SHOULD NOT (NOT) BE FREEMASONS. SINCE MASONIC ORGANISATIONS ARE NOT ILLEGAL, COSSIGA ARGUED THAT THE CSM HAD UNDERMINED THE CONSTITUTIONAL FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION.

3. THIS WAS AN EARLY SALLY IN AN EXTRAORDINARY PUBLIC CAMPAIGN WHICH COSSIGA HAS BEEN WAGING IN RECENT MONTHS TO DEFEND THE CONSTITUTION AND HIS INTERPRETATION OF THE SPIRIT WHICH UNDERLIES IT. IN HIS FIRST FIVE YEARS AS PRESIDENT, COSSIGA RARELY INTERVENED IN PUBLIC. SINCE THIS FEBRUARY, HE HAS RARELY BEEN OFF THE FRONT PAGES. HE HAS ANNOUNCED HIS DETERMINATION TO CONTINUE SHAKING 'STONES FROM HIS SHOE' UNTIL HIS TERM EXPIRES IN JULY 1992.

THE STONES IN THE PRESIDENT'S SHOE

4. COSSIGA'S VIGILANCE, AS A LAWYER BY TRAINING AS WELL AS PRESIDENT, OVER THE MACHINERY OF JUSTICE HAS BEEN A PROMINENT THEME IN HIS RECENT CAMPAIGN. BUT HE HAS ALSO, MORE CONTROVERSIAALLY, LOST HIS FORMER INHIBITIONS AGAINST VOICING CONCERN ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE OF ITALY'S POLITICAL LEADERS IN MEETING THE RESPONSIBILITIES WHICH HE REGARDS AS THEIRS UNDER THE

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CONSTITUTION. TYPICAL INTERVENTIONS HAVE BEEN:

(A) IN FEBRUARY THIS YEAR, DURING HIS STATE VISIT TO FRANCE, COSSIGA URGED ITALY'S POLITICAL LEADERS TO PUT THE NATIONAL INTEREST BEFORE PARTY SQUABBLES, SO AS TO ENABLE THE GOVERNMENT TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF THE DAY, AND TO MODERNISE ITALY'S CREAKING AND INEFFICIENT INSTITUTIONS.

(B) IN MAY, COSSIGA BITTERLY ATTACKED THE 'CRAZED ATTEMPTS' OF THE RAPIDLY GROWING AUTONOMIST POLITICAL LEAGUES OF NORTHERN ITALY TO 'UNDERMINE THE TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY OF THE NATION'. (THE LEAGUES WANT TO DIVIDE ITALY INTO A FEDERATION OF REGIONS, TO END WHAT THEY SEE AS THE SUBSIDISATION OF THE POOR AND INEFFICIENT SOUTH BY THE PROSPEROUS AND HARD-WORKING NORTH.)

(C) ALSO IN MAY, COSSIGA SUMMONED THE SICILIAN JUDGES TO RESPOND TO ALLEGATIONS BY THE THEN MAYOR OF PALERMO, ORLANDO, THAT DAMNING EVIDENCE COLLECTED DURING JUDICIAL INVESTIGATIONS AGAINST MAFIA BOSSES HAD BEEN DELIBERATELY CONCEALED. COSSIGA THEN CRITICISED ORLANDO FOR MAKING ALLEGATIONS ON SUCH A DELICATE ISSUE WITHOUT EVIDENCE.

(D) IN SEPTEMBER, IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE MAFIA MURDER OF A SICILIAN MAGISTRATE, COSSIGA SENT A FORMAL MESSAGE TO PARLIAMENT CALLING FOR URGENT MEASURES AGAINST THE MAFIA (MY TELNO 799). HE COUPLED THIS WITH A PERSONAL ATTACK ON ORLANDO, NOW NO LONGER MAYOR OF PALERMO, BUT STILL ACTIVE ON THE MAVERICK FRINGE OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRAT PARTY POLITICS. COSSIGA ACCUSED ORLANDO OF EXPLOITING THE MAFIA EMERGENCY FOR HIS OWN POLITICAL ENDS.

COSSIGA'S MOTIVES

5. COSSIGA HAS GIVEN NO (NO) PUBLIC EXPLANATION FOR HIS NEW APPROACH TO THE PRESIDENCY. BUT THEORIES ABOUND. SOME SAY THAT HE SUDDENLY DESPAIRED OF THE POLITICIANS' WILL OR ABILITY TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT SUCH SERIOUS AND PERENNIAL PROBLEMS AS THE MAFIA AND ITALY'S INSTITUTIONAL FATIGUE, AND REALISED THAT WITH ONLY TWO MORE YEARS AS PRESIDENT, TIME REMAINING FOR HIM TO INFLUENCE EVENTS WAS RUNNING OUT. ANOTHER THEORY IS THAT COSSIGA WAS STUNG BY THE WIDESPREAD CRITICISM OF HIS PERFORMANCE FOLLOWING THE RESIGNATION OF THE DE MITA COALITION IN MAY 1989, WHEN HIS EXTREME CAUTION ALLOWED THE COALITION PARTIES TO DELAY THE FORMATION OF A NEW GOVERNMENT UNTIL AFTER THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS OVER A MONTH LATER. COSSIGA MAY HAVE DETERMINED THEN NEVER AGAIN TO LET THE PARTIES

MANIPULATE HIM IN THIS WAY.

CURRENT CONCERNS

6. TWO ISSUES WILL BE AT THE TOP OF COSSIGA'S MIND AS HE ARRIVES IN LONDON. HE HAS SAID LITTLE PUBLICLY ON THE GULF CRISIS. BUT, FROM THE START, HE HAS TAKEN A CLOSE PERSONAL INTEREST IN IT, MAINTAINING ALMOST DAILY CONTACT WITH ANDREOTTI. I KNOW THAT THE THREAT OF WAR, WITH ITALIAN LIVES AT STAKE, WEIGHS HEAVILY ON HIS MIND. IT WOULD BE IN HIS NATURE TO WORRY THAT AN OUTBREAK OF HOSTILITIES MIGHT OVERSHADOW HIS VISIT.

7. COSSIGA MUST ALSO BE DEEPLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE RECENT REOPENING OF THE OLD WOUND SURROUNDING THE KIDNAPPING AND MURDER BY LEFT WING TERRORISTS IN 1978 OF FORMER PRIME MINISTER ALDO MORO. THIS AROSE FROM THE DISCOVERY LAST WEEK, IN A FORMER TERRORIST SAFE-HOUSE IN MILAN, OF PHOTOCOPIES OF HITHERTO UNKNOWN LETTERS APPARENTLY WRITTEN BY MORO WHILE DETAINED. THESE SEEM TO CONTAIN NO (NO) MAJOR NEW REVELATIONS. BUT, AS INTERIOR MINISTER AT THE TIME (WHO RESIGNED WHEN MORO'S BODY WAS FOUND), COSSIGA HAD A CENTRAL ROLE IN WHAT WAS ONE OF ITALY'S DARKEST MOMENTS. THE SUBJECT IS ONE TO KEEP OFF UNLESS HE RAISES IT.

CONCLUSIONS

8. COSSIGA MUST BE CONCERNED THAT A NEW BOUT OF NATIONAL SOUL-SEARCHING OVER MORO WILL FURTHER DIVERT ATTENTION FROM THE NEED TO DELIVER RESPONSIBLE, EFFICIENT AND MODERN GOVERNMENT TO ITALY, AT A TIME OF RAPID INTERNATIONAL CHANGE. IT IS THE PERCEPTION OF SUCH A NEED WHICH HAS DRIVEN HIS CRUSADE OF RECENT MONTHS. IN PURSUING IT, COSSIGA HAS ATTRACTED MUCH CRITICISM - SOME OF IT PERHAPS JUSTIFIED - FOR INCONSISTENCY, AND FOR STRAYING BEYOND HIS STRICT POWERS.

9. THIS HAS NOT (NOT) BEEN BALANCED BY POPULAR AFFECTION COMPARABLE TO THAT ENJOYED BY HIS CAMPAIGNING PREDECESSOR PERTINI. BUT COSSIGA HAS MADE SOME PROGRESS IN SENSITISING PUBLIC OPINION AND THE POLITICAL PARTIES TO SOME OF THE UNDERLYING PROBLEMS WHICH ITALY MUST TACKLE IF THE COUNTRY IS TO MAINTAIN ITS ECONOMIC SUCCESS OF THE LAST DECADE. AND HE HAS SHOWN THAT, UNDERLYING HIS CURIOUS SARDINIAN MIXTURE OF PRINCIPLED OBSTINACY, INDECISION AND IMPETUOSITY, HE IS NOT (NOT) WITHOUT COURAGE. HE IS ALSO A GREAT CONVERSATIONALIST, BUT OF THE HIT OR MISS VARIETY: HE WILL ALWAYS PREFER TALK, HOWEVER INANE, TO SILENCE.

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