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ITALY : Government

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THE MAKING OF A PRESIDENT

Summary: After two weeks and 23 polls Italy's "grand electors" have finally chosen the Christian Democrat Giovanni Leone as the country's sixth post-war president -- and, in the process, have dealt a severe blow to the Center-Left system. Leone's narrow majority, against the veteran Socialist Pietro Nenni, was gained only through the support of Right-wing forces. Features of the protracted electoral process were the disunity of the Christian Democrats and the solidarity of a Left-wing alliance of Communists, Socialists and Proletarian Socialists.

This has not been a particularly happy Christmas for Italian democracy. The protracted and acrimonious electoral process which made the Christian Democrat Giovanni Leone the sixth post-war president of Italy -- on the 23rd poll, after more than two weeks of interparty and intraparty maneuvering -- has accentuated and aggravated the country's deep-seated political ills.

The irony is that the final two votes pitted against each other two widely respected figures, either of whom might at an earlier stage of the game (and for once the term is apt) have won the support of most of the forces which at the end stood ranged in bitterly hostile blocs -- the "life senators" Leone and Nenni. Ironically again, both are supporters of the "Center-Left" concept which has given Italy its ruling coalitions for eight years; and yet their final confrontation has dealt a fateful and possibly fatal blow to that concept.

Among the by-products of the election, three stand out. First, factional disunity among the Christian Democrats -- divided into nine distinct correnti -- is greater than ever before. Thus, the candidature of Amintore Fanfani, stubbornly maintained for a week, failed because almost a quarter of the party's 425 "grand electors" (deputies, senators and representatives of the regional governments) refused to vote for him. As the Christian Democratic Left blocked Fanfani, so the Right prevented the candidature of his rival Aldo Moro -- who would have been acceptable to the Socialists and the Communists, and could thus have been elected even if a minority of his own party opposed him.

While the Christian Democrats demonstrated their deep disunity, a new left-wing alignment of Communists, Socialists (PSI) and Proletarian Socialists (PSIUP) displayed a solidarity unprecedented in recent years. In their support of the Socialist Franco De Martino and then in the last-minute switch to Nenni, the alignment showed unexpected discipline, with a very narrow voting "spread": from 393 to 408 (whereas the range for the two Christian Democratic candidates went from 377 for Fanfani on the fourth poll to 518 for Leone). This again has important long-term significance: it will strengthen the tendency in the left wing of the PSI to abandon the Center-Left and seek "new alignments" which would include the Communists. The PCI has thus achieved one of its two major objectives in the presidential election: to preserve left-wing solidarity (the other, unachieved, objective being to ensure that a president was elected with their support, as happened in 1964 with the Social Democrat Saragat).

Blow to Center-Left

The third important result of the electoral struggle we have touched upon already: the severe blow that has been dealt to the Center-Left system of government, national,

regional and local. It is not merely that the Socialists voted on one side, while their coalition partners voted on the other. What is more damaging for the future of the coalition is the fact that, while the PSI shifted to the Left, the majority of the Christian Democrats lurched to the Right. The crucial moment came with the choice of a candidate to replace Fanfani. At the meeting of the C. D. "grand electors" on December 21 two names were put forward: Leone (whom the Social Democrats, Liberals and Republicans had already indicated they would support) and Moro. By a narrow margin (it is generally reported -- no official figures are available) the vote went to Leone.

In the circumstances the choice acquired a political significance which it would not earlier have had. By this time the Socialists had made it clear that they were prepared to withdraw De Martino's candidature if the "Demochristians" nominated Moro -- whom the PCI would also have supported. As the "Center-Left" candidate with Communist support, Moro would have gained a comfortable majority: a solution which would have suited the long-term goals of the PCI very well. By deciding against this, the majority of the Christian Democrats showed that they did not want to have a president whom the Left could claim it helped to elect. Thus Leone, a man of integrity and ability who had successfully avoided identification with any of his party's factions, found the label "Center-Right" attached to his candidature. It was apparently his concern over this that led him to spend another day and a half in interparty consultations in an effort to "resolve his reservations," as he put it. During the interim the Christian Democrats abstained from voting (as they did 14 times in the course of the 23 polls -- another unprecedented feature of this election).

Meanwhile, the Socialists, to counter the "Center-Right" candidature of a man who was not of the Center-Right, chose their former leader, the veteran Nenni, in place of De Martino. But the logic of polarization was at work again: the Social Democrats (PSDI) and Republicans (PRI), who had earlier indicated that they would accept Nenni, were now virtually committed to supporting Leone. Thus, when it came to the final vote on Christmas Eve, the confronting blocs remained more or less intact -- and Leone could gain his majority of 13 only through the supporting votes of the Right-wing MSI (36 electors), the conservative Liberals (49)

and the Monarchists (7). The PCI promptly condemned what it called "the formation of a Center-Right front extending as far as the Fascists," while the Secretary-General of the MSI, Almirante, jubilantly declared that his party had "contributed in a decisive manner" to the election of Leone, thereby inflicting "an historic defeat on the Communists and all their allies and accomplices."

Such commentaries will do nothing to improve the prospects of the already ailing Center-Left, nor will the polemical bitterness which repeatedly erupted in physical scuffles during the second week of the voting. Those who believe that the Center-Left, for all its failings and failures, represents the best available governmental formula for Italy today must view the immediate future with concern. When the new president takes office, Premier Colombo must present the collective resignation of his Cabinet. It is far from certain that the embittered Socialists will agree to rejoin it; and without them the Center-Left experiment will finally fail. New national elections (not due until 1973) would hardly solve the problem: in the present circumstances they would probably increase the polarization of Italian political forces and, developing the pattern of the local elections last June, bring a sizeable increase in the extreme Right-wing vote at the expense of the Christian Democrats.

In wishing their new president well, many Italians must wonder uneasily whether the creeping crisis of their country's political institutions can be overcome during his term of office.

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