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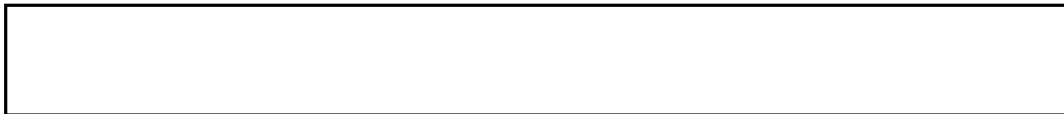
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Italy's Christian Democrats Avoid Split
But Settle Little 3

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Italy's Christian Democrats Avoid Split But
Settle Little

The leaders of Italy's Christian Democratic Party reached a compromise at their national council meeting last week on the contentious issue of when to hold their party congress.

They made little progress on the more basic questions--such as how to deal with the Communist Party--that will be at the center of congress debate.

The congress will open on March 4, a date acceptable to both the Christian Democratic left--led by interim party chief Zaccagnini and Prime Minister Moro--and the center-right group that is seeking to gain control of the party. The latter group, which includes a majority of the party, wanted the congress held as soon as possible, since interim party chief Zaccagnini is scheduled to step down at the meeting.

The center-right maintains that Zaccagnini's tendency to encourage a "dialogue" with the Communist opposition threatens to edge the Christian Democrats toward broader cooperation with the Communists. Zaccagnini was trying to delay the congress until spring or later in order to consolidate the influence the party left has been gaining since he took over in July.

Perhaps the most significant development at the council meeting was the emergence of a loose centrist faction, consisting of some uncommitted party leaders, such as Treasury Minister Colombo, and those like Foreign Minister Rumor who were not firmly allied with the two major groups vying for control. They apparently

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want to work for a broadly based majority that would include all but the extreme left and right in the party.

Defense Minister Forlani remains the favorite to succeed Zaccagnini. He is continuing to take steps designed to establish his independence from the center-right group, whose support gave his candidacy its initial impetus. The new centrist faction seems to view Forlani as its natural candidate, but many share the irritation of his original supporters over his growing reluctance to choose sides.

The Christian Democrats emerged from this latest gathering as a party that has avoided an open split but is still far from agreement on how to deal with the problems that led to unprecedented Communist gains in the elections last June.

This makes the coming congress a crucial event; failure at that time to unite behind a new leader and settle on a coherent policy would leave the Christian Democrats in poor shape to compete with the Communists in the next round of local elections this spring.

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