

175

Memorandum for:

The attached briefing paper was requested by Ty Cobb, NSC. It covers the background and prospects of the Italian Communist Party (PCI).

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The Italian Communist Party

I. How Powerful are the Italian Communists?


The Italian Communist Party (PCI) is the largest Communist Party in Western Europe. The parliamentary elections last June, which saw the gap between the Christian Democrats and the PCI narrow to about 3 percentage points in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate, has left the Communists within striking distance of becoming the largest party in the country when the next national election takes place. With 30 percent of the vote, it is the second largest party in Italy.

- PCI support is not limited to blue collar workers. It also draws substantial support from the upper and middle classes.
- The Communists have established a significant presence nearly everywhere in Italy. They are strongest, however, in the urban areas of the center and northwest of the country. 

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II. The Communist Position Today




The Christian Democrats lost more than 5 percentage points in the elections last June, a landslide defeat by Italian standards.

- The election results have made it mathematically possible for the first time for the Communists and smaller parties to form a government without the Christian Democrats.
- This is not very likely at the moment because of the rivalry between the Socialists and the Communists and the suspicion with which Communist leader Enrico Berlinguer and Socialist leader Bettino Craxi regard each other. 

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Some Christian Democrats 

 appear to be interested in the possibility of an arrangement with the Communists. Some Communist and Christian Democratic politicians have hinted publicly at interest in a possible deal, and  there have been secret exploratory talks between left-wing Christian Democrats and Communist leaders. The DC politicians presumably have in mind something which would fall short of actual Communist participation in the government. They may view the so-called "historic compromise" of 1976-1979, in which the Communists traded their support for Christian Democratic-led governments for concessions on social and economic issues, as a possible model. 

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The prospects for a deal between the Christian Democrats and the Communists in the near future also appear remote.

- Left-wing Christian Democrats know that this could cause a split with anti-Communist factions within their party.

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[Redacted]

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- Communist leader Berlinguer could also have trouble selling a deal -- many Communists feel they were double-crossed and put off with promises during the period of the "historic compromise." [Redacted]

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Nevertheless, the prospect of a deal between the Christian Democrats and the Communists cannot be totally disregarded. Many Christian Democrats and Communists can agree on one thing -- their dislike for Socialist leader Craxi.

- He is in many ways a more dangerous political rival to both parties than they are to each other because his party is in a position to siphon off support from both the Communists and the DC [Redacted]

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III. Origins of Communist Strength

The Communists owe their pivotal position on the Italian political scene to historical and socio-economic factors.

- They established their credentials as patriots through their leading role in the underground resistance to Mussolini and the German occupation. Unlike the situation of the British or American Communists, they are not generally seen as the agents of an alien power.

- As the preeminent party of opposition, they have been able to establish themselves as the spokesman of the discontented and have-nots in postwar Italy. Their supporters include industrial workers and unemployed or underemployed university graduates, as well as those repelled by the corruption of the Italian political system. [Redacted]

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The Communists have made the most of these advantages through strong organization and good leadership.

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- They have buttressed their reputation as patriotic Italians by distancing themselves from the Soviets -- condemning, for example, Soviet abuses of human rights, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the military coup d'etat in Poland.

- They have established themselves as "democrats" and "responsible" participants in the political system -- rather than enemies of democracy -- by building a long record of responsible participation in Parliament and opposition to political terrorism. [Redacted]

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IV. Changes in Italian Communism

The evidence suggests that in addition to taking advantage of the system, the Italian Communists to some extent have been coopted by it.

- The public record [Redacted] indicates that there are no responsible leaders within the party who think seriously of establishing Communist rule or a one-party state in Italy.

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Lingering hopes of this kind appear to have been dispelled by the fall of the

[Redacted]

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[redacted]

Allende government in Chile in 1973. Leaders drew the conclusion that there was no hope for a Communist government to survive in a Western country unless it was supported by an overwhelming majority of the population -- not a realistic possibility in Italy. [redacted]

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The evidence indicates in fact that the domestic political tactics of the Communists are not too dissimilar from those of the other Italian parties. Their major goal is to win representation in the government through the control of one or more ministries. They would hope to use this not only to pursue programmatic goals, but also as evidence of "respectability" to enhance their appeal at the polls. [redacted]

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- Under the circumstances in which they would be likely to share in power -- as part of a multi-party coalition -- they would be compelled to behave like the other parties, compromising on one point to secure concessions on another. [redacted]

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V. Communist Internal Problems

Moreover, the successes of Italian communism have not come free of cost. Traditional Communist voters have not been able to accept the party's willingness to support centrist governments and austerity measures that hit workers the hardest.

- Although the Communists held steady in the last elections, they have slipped more than 4 percentage points from the high reached in 1976.
- The party's drift toward compromise with the "bourgeois" parties and its dropoff in the polls have strengthened a trend toward factionalism within the party leadership. At least five factions, ranging from old-line Stalinists to Social-Democrats can be identified.

Although the prominence of moderates in the party leadership makes the Communists more acceptable partners to the other Italian parties, their internal divisions also rob them of much of the organizational advantage they have enjoyed in the past. [redacted]

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VI. Significance for the United States

The relatively modest goals and internal problems of the Communists does not mean that their participation in government would be a matter of indifference to the United States. Although no puppets of the Soviet Union, few Italian Communist leaders are disposed toward friendship with the United States. There is little reason to doubt that once in government, they would attempt to nudge Italy in the direction of a more neutralist stance. [redacted]

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