

Former CP leader D'Alema becomes prime minister of Italy

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For the first time, a former Communist Party (PCI) functionary has become prime minister of Italy. Massimo D'Alema took up his new office on October 21.

D'Alema can look back at a textbook career as a Stalinist functionary in the PCI and its successor organisations. The son of a PCI functionary, his only job has been that of a politician. In 1976 he headed the Communist Youth organisation for seven months. He then rose to become PCI chief in the Apulia region. After heading the central staff of the PCI, he became chief editor of the party's newspaper. In 1994 he was elected chairman of the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), the successor party to the PCI.

Only a few years ago the elevation of such a man to head the government of a NATO state would have unleashed a storm of headlines world-wide. It would have been regarded as something of an epochal occurrence.

But the change in government last week occurred relatively quietly. Where concern was expressed, it was not over the choice of a long-time 'Communist' to head the government, but rather the danger that Italy might resume its old pattern of unstable coalitions.

Under D'Alema the PDS has broken with anything that might recall the party's Communist Party origins. It has joined the social democratic international and regards Blair's New Labour and Clinton's Democrats as models to emulate.

The parliamentary majority that D'Alema has cobbled together depends on 70-year-old Francesco Cossiga. A former head of the secret service, this ex-interior minister and state president epitomises the role played by the Christian Democrats over 40 years. Cossiga's behind-the-scenes intrigues are so notorious, even the conservative press call him 'yesterday's man', 'an undercover plot-hatcher', 'tireless puppet master' and 'sharp-tongued intriguer'.

Cossiga has set himself the task of reviving the

Christian Democrats after they disintegrated earlier this decade. To this end, some six months ago he founded a new party called Union of Democrats for the Republic (UDR).

The UDR has 31 deputies in the lower house and 18 senators, all of them deserters from other political parties. Most came from Forza Italia, the right-wing populist party created by press baron Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi and his neo-fascist partners greeted their transfer of allegiance to D'Alema with accusations of betrayal.

D'Alema has had to pay a high price to secure Cossiga's support. The UDR has three ministerial posts in the new government, and has received promises that private Catholic schools will receive more state finances. Above all, Cossiga hopes that government office will give the UDR a higher profile over his right-wing competitors, enabling it to emerge as the biggest challenger to the PDS after the next elections.

The new government is a coalition comprising seven parties and two non-partisan ministers. To stitch this together D'Alema had to increase the number of ministries to 25.

Five of these parties were represented in the old government: the PDS, the Peoples Party (PPI)--which emerged out of the left wing of the old Christian Democrats, the Renewal List (RI) of Foreign Minister Dini, the Greens, and a new Socialist Party (SDI). Former central bank chief Ciampi, with no party affiliation, retains the budget and finance ministry, a key post. In addition there are Cossiga's UDR and the Italian Communist Party (PDCI), with two ministers.

The PDCI was born during the recent government crisis. It was formed by people who split from Rifondazione Comunista (RC--Communist Refoundation), and is led by the 72-year-old arch Stalinist Armando Cossuta.

For the last two and a half years Rifondazione Comunista supported the Prodi government, ensuring it a

majority without holding any ministerial positions. This enabled Prodi to push through the strict budgetary measures needed to qualify Italy for entry into the European Monetary Union.

However, the draft 1999 budget unleashed a conflict within the RC. Fausto Bertinotti, the RC leader, withdrew support for Prodi, but was opposed inside his party by Cossuta and 21 of RC's 34 deputies. When the vote of confidence tabled by Prodi was heard on October 9, Cossuta and his 20 colleagues voted to support the government. They were then expelled from RC and formed the PDCI.

Prodi lost the vote of confidence by one vote because the right-wing opposition were able to persuade a deputy from Dini's Renewal List to vote against the government. Prodi's attempt to form a new government including the UDR failed, as he was not prepared to accept Cossiga's conditions. This opened the way for D'Alema, who showed no scruples in making a pact with the old Christian Democratic intriguer, to become prime minister.

D'Alema has pledged to continue with the policies of his predecessor. Firstly, the draft budget that caused Prodi's downfall is to be presented once again, unchanged, to parliament. This news encouraged the stock market to respond favourably to the new government.

Nevertheless, the collapse of the Prodi government means the attempt to create more stable political conditions in Italy (where the average life of any post-war administration has been less than a year) has failed. Most commentators predict that the administration D'Alema now heads will be of limited duration. The political interests it straddles are too varied, and they are concerned only with securing their own immediate tactical advantage.

The 'Olive Tree' alliance on which Prodi's government rested was originally conceived as the foundation for a more broadly based political party that could secure a stable parliamentary majority and not have to rely on numerous coalition partners. Now, however, the 'Olive Tree' is all but dead.

D'Alema's expressed hope that the PDS might achieve over 40 percent in an election remains a dream. With 680,000 members and a 21 percent share of the vote, it is the largest Italian party. But it is considerably smaller than the old Communist Party of Italy, which at its peak boasted 2 million members and a 35 percent vote. The neo-fascist National Alliance of Fini is not far behind the PDS, with 480,000 members and a 16 percent vote.

Besides the machinations that traditionally dominate

Italian political life, fundamental social causes underlie the splintering of the party landscape. Like the rest of Europe, Italy has witnessed the opening of a deep gulf between the established parties and the mass of the population. There are hardly any significant differences between the different parties, which all advocate business-friendly policies directed against the social interests of broad sections of the populace. However, lacking a firm social basis, these parties tend to become the instruments of the egotistical interests of small groups.

For some time, a reform of the constitution has been under discussion, whose principal aim would be the creation of stable political conditions without the need for a broad social base. One proposal is a presidential form of rule similar to France or the USA, in which the president would have wide-ranging powers. Another is the 'first past the post' system of Britain, which automatically excludes smaller political parties from parliament. So far these plans have not materialised because of the conflicting interests of the existing parties.

Rifondazione Comunista attempted to bridge the contradictions between the established parties and the mass of the people by presenting itself outside of parliament as a left-wing opposition, while supporting the government inside parliament. This political balancing act only led to its own disintegration. Three years ago, in a previous conflict over a draft budget, the RC lost many of its deputies to the government camp.

The latest manoeuvres of the 'left' parties underscore the fact that the Italian working class needs a new programme and a new party that will enable it to intervene as an independent force into political events.

See Also:

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