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Monti says he's still open to leading Italy

BY RACHEL DONADIO

After weeks of speculation, Italy's caretaker prime minister, Mario Monti, said on Sunday that he would not run as a candidate in the national elections expected in February, but that he was open to leading the government if parties that endorsed his reform agenda asked him to.

Mr. Monti said at a news conference Sunday that he would give "appreciation, encouragement and, if asked, my guidance."

Above all, Mr. Monti called on parties across the political spectrum to adopt his "Monti agenda," whose motto for fighting the crisis, he said, was "Change Italy, reform Europe."

Mr. Monti said he did not like "personal parties" and would not add his name to a party's list of candidates, but later told a television interviewer that he would not rule out allowing a centrist grouping to name him as its candidate for prime minister if he felt the conditions were right. Under Italian law, parties must name their candidate for prime minister before elections.

His careful wording appeared to keep Mr. Monti out of the blood sport of Italian party politics, but left open the possibility that he could play a central role — including as head of the government — if a centrist grouping named him as its candidate for prime minister and if the center-left Democratic Party, which opinion polls are placing first, does not win enough votes to govern. The elections are expected to be held on Feb. 24 and 25.

Mr. Monti, an economist, replaced Silvio Berlusconi as prime minister amid fierce economic turmoil in November 2011 and helped restore Italy's international credibility, but his government's tax increases have been unpopular and exacerbated Italy's longest post-World War II recession.

Mr. Monti said he would step down after Mr. Berlusconi's party, the People of Liberty, withdrew its support from his government this month, opening the most chaotic season in Italian politics in **ITALY, PAGE 4**

ITALY, FROM PAGE 1

decades. President Giorgio Napolitano dissolved Parliament after Mr. Monti resigned Friday. He will remain as prime minister until after elections.

On Sunday, Mr. Monti said that Italy had passed the economic emergency — and done so on its own, without asking for help from the European Union or International Monetary Fund — but was not out of the woods. He said he would soon publish a "Monti agenda" of ways to improve Italy's financial health.

Mr. Monti is widely seen as a de facto centrist candidate, but he insisted that he would remain outside of the fray while serving as prime minister until a new government is formed after elections. Yet questions about the logistics

of his future role have thrown the Italian political system into even greater disarray.

For his part, Mr. Berlusconi, who has been striking an increasingly populist line in order to draw votes to his collapsing party, took to the airwaves to hammer Mr. Monti. "Last night I had a nightmare, I woke up screaming. There was still a Monti government," he said on state-run television.

Pier Luigi Bersani, the leader of the Democratic Party, who has been undermined by Mr. Monti's dividing of the political center, issued a terse statement. "We need more change, more equality, more work. And so we need a political majority that isn't 'strange' but that is real and coherent, strongly pro-Europe and strongly reform-minded," he said.

Mr. Monti called Mr. Bersani "a legitimate candidate for prime minister of a coalition."

Appearing on a television talk show later on Sunday, Mr. Monti said he would not rule out being named a candidate for prime minister for a centrist grouping that has been courting him, if there were "sufficient forces and guarantees of credibility in their commitment."

These groupings include a veteran centrist party, the Union of Christian Democrats, and a civic movement led by the president of Ferrari, Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, which said on Sunday that it would support Mr. Monti. A handful of former Berlusconi loyalists have also indicated their support for Mr. Monti, including Gianfranco Fini, a former speaker of the Lower House.

The centrists are also allied with Andrea Riccardi, the minister of cooperation, or intercultural relations, in the Monti government and a co-founder of a liberal Catholic group, the Community of Sant'Egidio, a sign that Mr. Monti enjoys strong support from the Catholic Church, which remains a powerful political force in Italy.

In an election with rising populism, polls indicate that even with Mr. Monti's blessing, these centrists would not win more than 15 percent of the vote.

Mr. Monti appears to be laying the groundwork for a civic-minded, Catholic-centrist movement, which Italy has not had since the Christian Democratic party, which governed Italy during the postwar period, collapsed in a bribery scandal in the early 1990s.

"I think that the axis in the coming years can be framed as 'will to change' and 'Europe' more than left and right," Mr. Monti said.

In a nearly three-hour news conference, Mr. Monti offered some criticisms of Mr. Berlusconi, saying he had difficulty "following his line of thought." He said Mr. Berlusconi had called his government a disaster, then asked him to lead a center-right coalition, an offer he

said he refused.

Mr. Monti was also clear-eyed about the mixed record of his government, which raised taxes and the retirement age but was unable to carry out any significant structural overhaul in its short mandate.

He said that the right, namely Mr. Berlusconi's party, had blocked justice reform. "It's better to pass laws that are 'ad nationem' rather than 'ad personam,'" he said, implicitly saying Mr. Berlusconi had a tendency to seek laws that protect his own interests.

And he said that the hard left — especially the C.G.I.L. union, which has more retirees than workers among its membership and is a central constituency of the Democratic Party — had blocked more aggressive changes to Italy's labor laws. "They find it difficult to evolve, and this harms Italian workers," Mr. Monti said.

