

# Italy premier to step down after party insurrection

ROME

Matteo Renzi, 39, poised to become the country's youngest prime minister

BY JIM YARDLEY

Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, whose weak coalition government has come under increasing criticism, an-

nounced on Thursday that he would resign, after his own Democratic Party staged a dramatic insurrection and set the stage to replace him with the party's new leader, Matteo Renzi.

The Democratic Party is the largest member of Italy's coalition government, and the party's decision to dump Mr. Letta could be put to a confidence vote in parliament. Mr. Letta will meet with his cabinet on Friday morning and then present his resignation letter to Italy's president. This clears the path for Mr. Renzi, 39, to try to become Italy's youngest prime minister.

Mr. Renzi, the mayor of Florence, recently won a nationwide primary to become leader of the Democratic Party. He has a reputation for boldness and has long been considered Italy's most promising young politician. He has spoken repeatedly about the need for sweeping political and economic reforms. But until a few days ago, few analysts anticipated that he would lead a revolt against his party's sitting prime minister.

"Italy is living in a moment of difficulty," Mr. Renzi said during a televised emergency meeting of the Democratic Party on Thursday afternoon. He added: "We need to offer the possibility to emerge from this morass with a radical program to relaunch the country."

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TONY GENTILE/REUTERS

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pean countries are starting to emerge from a devastating recession. Unemployment tops 12 percent, and while business leaders have called for major reforms to spur economic growth, Italy's political system has been stalemated, largely unable to respond.

For Europe, which is witnessing rising populist anger in advance of the upcoming European parliamentary elections, Italy's economic doldrums and political gyrations are sources of persistent concern. Last year, Mr. Letta fended off challenges to bring down his government by arguing that Italy needed stability, an argument endorsed by many European leaders.

But Mr. Letta's government was ultimately doomed by inaction, partly be-

cause of the awkwardness of his coalition, a contentious marriage of left and right parties that was cobbled together after inconclusive national elections last February. Mr. Letta was hand-picked by Italy's president, Giorgio Napolitano, to lead the coalition as a compromise figure, a cool-headed politician with ties to opposition parties.

In his Thursday speech at the party meeting, Mr. Renzi expressed gratitude to Mr. Letta "for the considerable work he has done with government, a government born in a delicate moment." But for weeks, tensions had been rising between the two men, as Mr. Renzi began openly questioning the effectiveness of the government to tackle Italy's pressing problems, with Mr. Letta occasionally sniping back in return.

The two men met privately on Wednesday and, hours later, Mr. Letta used a televised news conference to fight for his job. He promised a new reform push and swatted at rumors about his uncertain future, making a veiled jab at Mr. Renzi, by saying that anyone who wanted his job should declare it openly.

Mr. Renzi himself has often said that he would prefer to become prime minister by winning an election, so that he could assume office with a public mandate for change. Italy, though, may not be pre-

pared to hold new elections for months, or longer. Italy's highest court has struck down portions of the country's election laws as unconstitutional and called on the government to draft a new law.

Mr. Letta had promised to do so — until Mr. Renzi unexpectedly intervened by brokering a deal with his party's longtime enemy, Silvio Berlusconi, the former prime minister. Parliament is expected to begin debating that proposal next week, but it is unclear how long it will take to pass. Given the uncertainty in parliament, and the growing outside criticism of the government, analysts say Mr. Renzi calculated that he could be more effective leading the government, rather than just leading his party.

"The push to have Renzi taking the lead comes from society, more than from within the Democratic Party," Giorgio Tonini, a party member who serves in Italy's senate, said on Wednesday night. "The idea behind it is that a leadership change can bring new nourishment to the government's actions and more consensus with the party."

Mr. Renzi is already facing criticism that he is motivated by personal ambition, and some members of his party used Thursday's meeting to express discomfort by the sudden shift in political direction.

"I am not convinced by this solution," said Giuseppe Civiati, a party member who challenged Mr. Renzi for leadership of the party last year. "I have always been skeptical of the bipartisan government. I don't know why it's future would be different by changing the prime minister."

He also questioned whether Mr. Renzi's legitimacy would suffer by not waiting to hold elections. "This is a passage which is a little less democratic," he said.

Now the question is how Mr. Renzi will coexist with the other parties in the coalition government. Angelino Alfano, the deputy prime minister and leader of the New Center Right Party, praised the accomplishments of the Letta government as a ship that had navigated rough waters. He warned that his center-right party would not continue to support the government if Mr. Renzi moved it too far to the left.

Speaking during a televised news conference, Mr. Alfano noted that there was some irony in the fact that Mr. Letta will be tendering his resignation on Friday. He said Italy's national statistics agency is expected to announce positive news about the country's economy.

Elisabetta Povoledo and Gaia Pianigiani contributed reporting from Rome.



TONY GENTILE/REUTERS

Enrico Letta has defended his government by saying that Italy needed stability.

