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Italians expected to deliver protest vote

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By Guy Dinmore and Giulia Segreti in Rome

Italians vote in local elections this weekend in the first polls since Mario Monti took over as prime minister last November, with officials worried that the main parties supporting his technocrat government could suffer serious setbacks from an austerity-weary electorate.

As recession bites deeper and taxes rise, opinion polls indicate that the government no longer enjoys the support of half the nation. Meanwhile, a series of corruption scandals at local and national level have eroded confidence in the main centre-left and centre-right parties backing Mr Monti in parliament.

If Italians register a large-scale protest vote, as expected, then the centre-right People of Liberty of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, and the centre-left Democrats led by Pier Luigi Bersani, could calculate that their best chance of winning general elections next year is to distance themselves from Mr Monti's reform efforts.

"It all depends how the protest vote is interpreted," said one senior official, concerned that the technocrat government is losing its initial momentum because of growing divisions in parliament.

Worry is also growing that a victory for François Hollande, socialist candidate in France's presidential election, would embolden Italy's trade unions and left-wing politicians. This would further complicate Mr Bersani's efforts to keep his fractious party fully behind Mr Monti's increasingly unpopular austerity drive.

About 15 per cent of the electorate is eligible to vote in some 800 municipalities across Italy, with polling stations open on Sunday and Monday. Opinion polls suggest Mr Berlusconi's party will be most damaged, with memories fresh of the corruption investigations and personal scandals that spurred the collapse of his government amid growing alarm on financial markets over Italy's debt burden last November.

The Northern League, former coalition allies of Mr Berlusconi who went into opposition against Mr Monti, had been expected to benefit from voters disgruntled with anti-European policies, echoing the electoral success of France's National Front. But the regional party's image of crusaders at war against a "thieving" Rome has been shattered by a corruption probe into its

own suspected pillaging of public funds, that drove Umberto Bossi, its founding leader, to resign.

One opinion poll suggested that Beppe Grillo, a maverick stand-up comic and populist who would take Italy out of the euro, could capture as much as seven per cent of the vote in the municipalities he is contesting. If translated at the national level, this would make his Five Star Movement the third largest political force.

A poor showing by the two main parties could benefit Mr Monti by underlining that they are in no shape at present to precipitate general elections. But it would also highlight the concerns of foreign investors around what kind of government will follow the technocrats.

Mr Bersani, the centre-left's fourth leader in as many years, said on Wednesday that Italy's problems were too serious to risk early elections and that the Democrats would wait until next spring. He also criticised Mr Monti's planned reintroduction of a property tax next month as "deadly".

Commentators say the post-Monti election campaign is effectively under way. Mr Berlusconi has announced a planned relaunch of his People of Liberty. Pier Ferdinando Casini, a centrist, hopes to form a new alliance, bringing in business figures and some of the current technocrats.

All opinion polls agree that none would come close to a decisive victory running alone. This could open the door to a second government led by Mr Monti, who has not laid out his future political ambitions.

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