

Berlusconi is Convicted: Now what?

Judith Harris (June 25, 2013)



The news that former Premier Silvio Berlusconi had been convicted to seven years in prison and to lifetime interdiction from public office had Italians of every walk of life and every political persuasion excited today. But there are broader considerations. In past weeks a canny Silvio Berlusconi said again and again that, no matter what the courts decided in the case of the state vs his Bunga Bunga-ing with minors, it would have no effect upon the government. But can this be true? The answer is no.

ROME - At the news stand this morning one man was shouting, "Should've given him a life sentence." Another started singing, in sarcastic mode, the Berlusconi pep anthem, "Meno male che Silvio c'e'" (Aren't we lucky that there's Silvio). Further down the road a group of dog walkers were quarreling at full throttle, with two defending Berlusconi from the ruling of the three-woman court ("witches! bitches!") who had ruled against him while the other two exulted. In Rome Giuliano Ferrara, tubby journalist, was organizing a demo of sympathy for Berlusconi in Piazza Farnese on the theme, "We are all sluts." From abroad came emails: "Will he actually go to prison?"



That, at least, was easy to answer: absolutely not. First, yesterday's decision came from only the lowest of three possible tribunals. Next will come an appeals court and then the Court of Cassations, Italy's highest court. These appeals will take time. In addition, Berlusconi is 76, and under Italian law people over 70 are not sent to prison. Technically nothing terrible will happen to him.

But there are broader considerations. In past weeks a canny Silvio Berlusconi said again and again that, no matter what the courts decided in the case of the state vs his Bunga Bunga-ing with minors, it would have no effect upon the government. This is the two-month-old government, headed by Enrico Letta, which the vaguely conservative Berlusconi political forces of the Partito della Libertà (PdL) share with the vaguely leftist Partito Democratico (PD). That government came to power solely because there seemed no other choice save to call costly new elections only months after an inconclusive vote in February. What further empowered the creation of this power-sharing government of uneasy bedfellows was, and is, the severity of the economic crisis with which the government must contend, and which continues to bring dismal daily news of business failures. But now that a Milan court has actually convicted the former premier, can the shared government ride into the sky undisturbed? The answer is no, as everyone, including Berlusconi himself, knows.

For Italy, it was important within the political culture that the trial took place at all and was brought to completion. It showed that the law is indeed equal for everyone. Moreover, the public prosecutors in Milan had asked a six- year sentence, but the court ruled for seven. This unexpected development has the legal effect of broadening the investigation into the potential complicity of 32 witnesses, many of them young women who have until now received monthly allowances of around \$3,000 from Berlusconi. These young women allegedly perjured themselves by giving false testimony in his defense.

Even Ruby Rubacuore, as the young woman accused of having sex with Berlusconi for money when she was only seventeen is known, boasted on the telephone with girl friends about the sleazy goings-on, only to retract her bragging while testifying repeatedly before the court that, "Oh, well, I told a lot of lies." By court order her belongings - the fancy shoes and handbags - will be seized. Others who will, by this decision, be dragged further into problems with the justice system include the aging TV newscaster Emilio Fede and the dental hygienist Nicole Minetti. Both are accused of acting as managers of the lively evenings at Berlusconi's Milan mansion.

"What we must ask ourselves is how this could have happened - how could our political system have put up with this for 20 years, in Europe? Elsewhere a political leader under such accusations would have been forced from office," said Ezio Mauro, editor-in-chief of the daily La Repubblica, at his daily editorial meeting. "This was a network susceptible to blackmail, and some of these girls were paid off with political offices. It was a network of liars."

On the other hand, the decision may work in some ways to the advantage of Berlusconi himself. Berlusconi is a whiz at playing the victim, and continues to have a core of loyal admirers. Addressing Letta directly today in Rome, Berlusconi warned that, "If you do not carry out what we'd agreed upon [in forming the government], there will be consequences." Translation: bow to our demands to lower taxes, or we bow out of the government.

Leaders of his PdL (which incidentally he threatens to shut down and replace with a more personalized political movement) went on the warpath today, echoing him in threats to bring down the government. Until now the PdL itself has resisted this because its polls have been negative, but in recent weeks Letta's Partito Democratico has been riddled by dissenting factions while Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) has been losing steam in polls and in Parliament, where several dissidents have walked out of the M5S group.



Today, however, some commentators were warning that the Letta government - supposed to remain in office at least one year - risks, as a result of the court decision, being brought down this autumn, meaning that national general elections could be called more than four years ahead of schedule. Berlusconi's economic guru, Renato Brunetta, has seized the moment to raise the ante in dealing with the government by insisting that the 1% planned increase in the VAT tax be dropped immediately. "None of this is acceptable," Brunetta thundered. "This is an attack against freedom. The time has come to say a definitive 'enough'."

Another Berlusconi crony, former Culture Minister Sandro Bondi, author of poems exalting his leader, warned, "It's ridiculous to think that this government can work with serenity while the leader of one of the parties supporting the government is politically massacred. One must make a serious decision before this judiciary destroys Italy." Another top Berlusconi aide, Fabrizio Cicchitto, called the decision "an operation aimed at destroying the existing political alliance." The Milan magistrates, backed by certain media and financial groups, are "irresponsible," he said. Said Mariastella Gelmini, Berlusconi's former Education Minister, "Berlusconi is stronger than ever before. The number of people who are close to him, including for his being persecuted, continues to grow."

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