

Silvio and Sophia, Two Styles

judith harris (October 25, 2013)



He was surely expecting it, but when the latest judiciary act involving former Premier Silvio Berlusconi arrived on Oct. 23, by all accounts it nevertheless came as una tegola in testa--a roof tile dropped on his head. This latest incrimination, which will bring Berlusconi to trial before a penal court on Feb. 11, is for vote-buying and is no less serious than the others--on the contrary. Berlusconi, already convicted of tax fraud, obviously fears time in prison, however unlikely. Coincidentally, the Italian supreme Cassations court has just cleared Sophia Loren, who did spend time in prison, for alleged tax dodging.

ROME - He was surely expecting it, but when the latest judiciary act involving Silvio Berlusconi arrived on Oct. 23, by all accounts it nevertheless came as una tegola in testa--a roof tile dropped on his head. This latest incrimination, which will bring Berlusconi to trial before a penal court on Feb. 11, is for vote-buying and is no less serious than the others (for a summary of these, see below)--on the



contrary. The vote that was bought helped to sink like a stone the center-left government headed by economist Romano Prodi. After achieving a majority in the Chamber of Deputies on Jan. 23, 2008, Prodi was defeated in the Senate in a close vote the following day, when only 156 voted in favor of his government, and 161 against.

Prodi was obliged to resign, precipitating the end of the legislature and the calling of new elections held that April. In those elections Berlusconi's Partito della Liberta' prevailed, and Berlusconi became Premier. Helping to bring down the Prodi government was the pudgy Senator Sergio De Gregorio, who had been elected in 2006 on the ticket of the left-leaning Italia dei Valori (IDV). Headed by former magistrate Antonio Di Pietro, this party was part of the center-left coalition. The right celebrated Prodi's downfall by eating mortadella sandwiches, in a presumed insulting reference to Prodi's North Italian background.

The real insult came, however, the month after the April 2008 elections, neatly won by Berlusconi. At that point, suddenly De Gregorio switched hats, moving from the IDV to return to the Senate representing Berlusconi's party. (It is still, incidentally, the PdL albeit he hopes to reconvert it to Forza Italia as soon as possible, possibly in order to regain more control over it from Angelino Alfano, his newly independent second-in-command). Many here believe that De Gregorio's vote was crucial in removing Prodi from the political scene and, even more seriously, in provoking costly new elections three years ahead of the normally scheduled five years.

In 2010 a Neapolitan court opened an investigation into De Gregorio, together with the editor of the vestiges of the once glorious Italian Socialist daily L'Avanti!, Valter Lavitola. There can be little doubt that De Gregorio's vote was purchased because he has admitted in court that he received a series of payments over time, including one of E500,000 dumped directly onto his desk in the Senate. Lavitola allegedly was Berlusconi's mediator who specialized in "sensitive missions" of this ilk, to the point that he acted for years as if he were "a statesman in incognito," in the words of that indictment. Already La Vitola has been sentenced to 3 years and 8 months in prison by Italy's high Cassations court for misappropriation of Avanti! funds. Since those glory days De Gregorio too has spent time in jail and is quoted in the Italian press as advising Berlusconi to "withdraw from the political scene. Set yourself and the country free."

The February date in court is only one of those pending. In Milan a court will decide on the length of time he is to be prohibited from holding public office because of his tax fraud definitive sentence. In Bari he is under investigation for allegedly having paid a sleazy businessman money for organizing what the press here is calling "escorts" for parties. An appeals court in Milan, where he has already been sentenced to one year, is to decide on a case in which Berlusconi's people allegedly listened, improperly, to phone taps involving dealings of a bank, Unipol, and Piero Fassino of the Partito Democratico. There the judges called the illegal phone tap a "Christmas present" to Berlusconi from businessmen, who offered the tap to him in hopes of a helping hand in a business deal in Romania. Not least, within weeks the Senate in Rome must vote on whether or not to strip Berlusconi of his Senate seat.

Why should we care? Because, with this last blow, Berlusconi by all accounts is ever more outraged at what he calls judiciary persecution, and is taking out his anger once again by threatening to bring down the government even though his party remains divided between the aggressive hawks who want to see elections by February and the more cautious doves. The PdL has a host of pebbles in its shoes, not least the election of left-leaning Rosi Bindi as head of the Anti-Mafia Commission of Parliament, a post without a chairperson--and hence without activity--for a shocking eight months because of the rift between the two parties of the coalition headed by Premier Enrico Letta. During



the fraught election process the PdL commission members stormed out because against Bindi's election. Moreover, they said, they would not be back.

Berlusconi's nightmare remains fear of prison even though it is unlikely that he will ever see a day behind bars. Coincidentally on the same day the new vote-buying trial was confirmed, the Italian supreme court, the Cassations, found in favor of Sophia Loren, who has now won her decades-long quarrel with the government over alleged non-payment of taxes. In fact, because of this La Loren spent a short period in prison in 1982. Asked later how she felt about it, she said simply, "When you hear a door clang and a key turn it locked, and you don't have the key, it's tough."

Now there's style. As her experience showed, for some, there truly is equality before the law.

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