

The rotten foundations of the Italian coalition government

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A court ruling against former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has highlighted the rotten and crumbling foundations of the recently-formed Italian government under Enrico Letta.

On May 8, the Milan Court of Appeal upheld a ruling reached in October 2012, sentencing Berlusconi to four years' imprisonment for tax evasion. The 76-year-old billionaire's Mediaset group is said to have evaded taxation by moving more than \$350 million in revenues for the purchase of media rights into foreign bank accounts.

The ruling still must be confirmed by the Supreme Court, and is expected to be reduced to a one year prison sentence. This could end Berlusconi's political career, however, as it would also mean a five-year ban from holding public office.

On Monday, the so-called "Ruby trial" re-opened against Berlusconi, concerning allegations of sex with a minor and abuse of office. Chief Prosecutor Ilda Boccassini accused the former prime minister of "systematic prostitution" in his villa, Arcore. She called for six years imprisonment and a lifetime ban from holding political office. A ruling in this case could be reached this month.

In a third trial, the former prime minister faces charges of bribery. He is accused of paying Senator Sergio De Gregorio €3 million to switch from the Italy of Values party to his own party, People of Freedom (PdL), thus bringing down the government of Romano Prodi.

Berlusconi's PdL is currently the main coalition partner of Prime Minister Enrico Letta, of the Democratic Party (PD). The two parties—which for twenty years were the Italian bourgeoisie's right and "left" parties of rule, respectively—formed a coalition government in April to continue austerity measures that

voters had sharply rebuffed just two months earlier.

Although Berlusconi does not hold any government office, as a senator, he still pulls the strings in the PdL. His closest political confidante, PdL secretary Angelino Alfano, is the number two in the new government, serving as vice premier and interior minister.

The ruling against Berlusconi revealed the undemocratic nature, semi-criminal character of the Letta government even before it has begun its work. On Saturday May 11, Interior Minister Alfano participated in a demonstration against the judiciary in the PdL stronghold of Brescia, bringing about the first government crisis.

Berlusconi appeared in person before several thousand followers in Brescia. Amid shouts of "All for Silvio", he said he would not be stopped by the judiciary. "Here I am, and here I stay", he said.

That the interior minister, in charge of the police and the country's internal security, should participate in a demonstration against his own judicial system is more than extraordinary for a democratic state. Alfano could not express more clearly that he does not give a damn about the law.

The Democratic Party has made some individual criticisms of Alfano's behaviour. For example, in an interview with *La Stampa*, economics minister Stefano Fassina complained that the demonstration against the judiciary makes for difficult relations between the parties, declaring the autonomy and independence of the judiciary non-negotiable.

But Prime Minister Enrico Letta seems determined to continue the coalition with the PdL. Because of the demonstration in Brescia, he even postponed a closed-door meeting in a Tuscan monastery, to which he had invited all ministers.

Previously, he had made major concessions to

Berlusconi, granting significant control over key posts in the judiciary to his party.

Berlusconi's friend and preferred candidate, state attorney Giorgio Santacroce, was appointed President of the Court of Cassation in Rome. This court had previously rejected all requests by Berlusconi to move his trials out of the hands of the Milan judiciary, which he considers to be biased, to another court more benevolently disposed towards him.

Moreover, the PdL was able to ensure that Berlusconi's former justice minister Francesco Nitto Palma was appointed chair of the parliamentary justice committee. Palma is considered to be the patron of a PdL parliamentary deputy with close connections to the Camorra, the Naples equivalent of the Mafia.

As interior minister, Alfano can also help Berlusconi out of his legal difficulties; after all, he is the author of the so-called *Lodo Alfano*, an amnesty law specially tailored for Berlusconi.

Berlusconi's defence team has now also been joined by celebrity lawyer Franco Coppi, who defended the recently deceased Senator Giulio Andreotti from charges of murder and Mafia involvement.

After the appeals court ruling against Berlusconi, the media speculated he might bring down the government and seek new elections, as the PdL is currently ahead in the polls. However, Berlusconi has assured that he did not intend to threaten the ruling coalition. His lawyer, Niccolò Ghedini, reassured the press, saying there was no link between the ruling and the stability of the government.

Although Berlusconi complains about the judiciary, he is conspicuously reluctant to criticize the Democrats, who are obviously ready to make any concession not to jeopardize the government coalition.

For his part, Prime Minister Enrico Letta has the full support of the EU Commission in Brussels and the German government in Berlin, which regard him as a guarantor for the enforcement of unpopular austerity dictates. To achieve this, they are ready to close both eyes to PdL ties with the Mafia and Camorra, and its open contempt of the courts. Their austerity measures, which have condemned broad sections of the population to poverty and unemployment, can only be imposed by dictatorial methods.

Not only the Letta government, but also the European Union increasingly stand with their backs to the wall. A

new study by the US Pew Research Institute has shown that support for the EU has dropped from 60 to 45 percent across Europe within one year. In Italy, only a quarter of all citizens regard the government's crisis management as satisfactory—half as many as last year. Only three percent consider their own economic situation to be good.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Letta's Democratic Party, a merger of the successors of the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats, is disintegrating under the pressure of the crisis. The party congress last weekend saw only about 500 of 900 invited delegates turn up.

The congress was necessary because the entire leadership under Pier Luigi Bersani had resigned after the disaster in the presidential elections. The long-standing trade union leader Guglielmo Epifani was finally chosen as Bersani's successor. From 1994 to 2010, Epifani had stood at the head of the CGIL, Italy's largest trade union confederation, first as vice president and then as president. He played a key role suppressing the resistance against the dismantling of the welfare state under various centre-right and centre-left governments.

Epifani's election shows that even Letta, who is from the Christian Democratic camp, can rely on the trade unions to enforce the EU's austerity measures. However, he cannot halt the decline of the Democratic Party.



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