

It's to the Matts, Guys

judith harris (August 25, 2013)



Saturday's five-hour powwow at Silvio Berlusconi's villa at Arcore, near Milan, was attended by his entire roster of backers. The aim: to decide what political moves remain open to him now that a high court has found him guilty of tax dodging. Should his supporters continue to press President Giorgio Napolitano for an amnesty, when his request would appear an admission of guilt? Since Napolitano gives no sign of being willing to grant such an amnesty, that is excluded. Meantime Premier Enrico Letta has also refused to give Berlusconi an out. The result is that new elections appear ever more likely.

ROME - Yesterday's five-hour powwow at [Silvio Berlusconi](#) [2]'s villa at Arcore, near Milan, was being called here the "super-summit" because it brought together his entire roster of backers. The aim: to decide what political moves remain open to him now that a high court has found him guilty of tax dodging. Should his supporters continue to press President [Giorgio Napolitano](#) [3] for an amnesty, when the request to do so is an implicit admission of guilt? Even if Berlusconi were willing, Napolitano shows no sign of being willing to grant him an amnesty. So now what?



For Berlusconi, the waning days of summer quickened the debate over how he can continue in politics. On Sept. 9 a parliamentary commission begins meeting to vote on Berlusconi's decadenza--that is, his being stripped of his Senate seat and hence of parliamentary immunity. After that commission vote, which is considered unlikely to go in Berlusconi's favor, the question goes before the entire Senate for another vote.

Yet another deadline arrives Oct 15, when Berlusconi must choose between house arrest or meetings with social workers. Should he cave in to house arrest for a year, leading his party from home? After all, as the doves in his party have argued, [Beppe Grillo](#) [4] runs the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) without being a member of Parliament. Otherwise Berlusconi could meet biweekly with a social worker for nine months, saying he is doing it for the good of the country, and get it over with before new elections are called. Finally, the hawks in his party have been urging him to throw down the gauntlet and declare war on everybody and everything.

Seeking a solution, this week was rife with appeals to Premier Enrico Letta, asked to find a way to get Berlusconi off the hook. But Letta knows two things: first, that to do so would be in violation of the Italian law governing the case, the Severino Law, and, secondly, that his own Partito Democratico (PD), which reluctantly shares government with Berlusconi's Freedom party (PdL), would implode. Letta rejected outright Berlusconi's mild overtures. The sense is therefore that national general elections loom ever more likely than even a few days ago; never mind that the last elections were held only last April.

At Arcore Saturday the delegation of cabinet ministers who have been governing partners with the left-leaning (but not very far left) PD for the past four months was headed by Interior Minister Angelino Alfano, Berlusconi's stand-in as head of the PdL founded by Silvio himself. Then there were the Berlusconi children, beginning with Marina, who reportedly went into the super-summit with appeals to her father to keep his cool. Siding with these doves were Berlusconi's financial advisors, who fear that new elections will throw into a new tizzy the Italian markets, and in particular the Berlusconi financial interests, which had just recently picked up.

Faced off against this formidable array were the party hawks, rooting for new elections as soon as possible, with Berlusconi heading the ticket, at whatever cost, and even if his conviction formally prohibits him from running for public office. This very vocal faction boasted the likes of Sandro Bondi, whose legacy as culture minister is nigh onto invisible; Dennis Verdini, just now under investigation by a Florentine court for corruption; and the party's pasionaria, Daniela Santanché.

Another source of friction is the hated tax on first homes, IMU, whose half-year summer payment was postponed as part of the governing compromise between Premier Letta's PD and the PdL. In hopes of fostering his own and his party's popularity, Alfano in particular has lobbied for the housing tax to be removed permanently. But, particularly in recent days, the government's respected chief financial minister Fabrizio Saccomani of the PD has declared that resources are insufficient for the state to drop that tax. A vote on this is slated in Parliament for Wednesday.

The hawks prevailed at Arcore, finally convincing a supposedly thoughtful, reluctant Berlusconi to declare war on the government. In case anyone doubted who had the last word, Santanché put it concisely, "The Cav [Cavaliere Berlusconi] has decided. The government falls." But if so, Berlusconi is prohibited, under the Severino Law, from being a candidate for office.

Today's banner headline in the daily owned by Berlusconi himself trumpets this warning, which is also a forewarning of the campaign to come: "If handcuffs prevail, Italian civilization is at risk." From Alfano came this: "Decadenza [his losing his Senate seat] is unthinkable and constitutionally unacceptable."



But however irate Berlusconi and his supporters may be, President Napolitano has the last word and seems unlikely to call new elections. Already PD activists are counting heads to see how many votes a second round of Letta government, without Alfano and Berlusconi, might command. They are not altogether pessimistic but calculate that a certain number of Beppe Grillo's deputies preferring economic stability may break ranks with their leader. Convinced he will prevail, Grillo makes no secret of preferring early elections under the old Porcellum rules.

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