

The Politics of Decadence

Judith Harris (November 27, 2013)



It has happened. Despite his kicking and screaming that he is the victim of a coup d'etat promulgated by "red judges", Silvio Berlusconi, 77, was today voted out of the Italian Senate, in a tense roll-call vote late Wednesday afternoon. "It is a day of mourning for democracy," he declared. But it is also the opening gambit in a future election campaign, and already his party, Forza Italia, has formally quit the governing coalition headed by Premier Enrico Letta of the Partito Democratico (PD).

This did not have to happen; he could have, and in so doing avoided the humiliation of the formal vote. He would also have gained precious weeks in so doing, but he chose not to resign because it



would have insinuated his guilt. Instead until the last minute he has been demanding that President Giorgio Napolitano concede an amnesty for him. To this the President explained, again and again, that under the law Berlusconi would first have to request that amnesty, a request Berlusconi refused, once again on grounds that to do so would imply guilt. Thus the stubborn stalemate ended with his expulsion.

Until the last minute no one knew for certain whether or not the vote would take place. And until the last minute his supporters on the floor of the Senate tried to have declared invalid the anti-corruption law under which he was convicted. The Severino Law, as it is called, disallows politicians with convictions of two years or more from holding public office. The law was passed in December 2012 with the votes of Berlusconi's own Freedom Party (PdL), but the party claims that it does not apply to Berlusconi because the alleged fiscal fraud took place years before that Law existed. The claims of unconstitutionality have not worked, and today Berlusconi's backers resorted to trying to gain time by appealing, again and again, for a secret ballot on his expulsion, but were voted down dozens of times. Whatever niceties of democratic life a secret vote would have meant, it was more important to the majority that there be no secret horse-trading, no vote buying. This is no arid debate: judiciary records show that vote buying in Parliament has happened in the past.

Turning out today to support Berlusconi were a thousand flag-waving, cheering fans - some wearing black arm bands of mourning - gathered outside the building where he rents a large apartment in Rome, Palazzo Grazioli, a few steps from Piazza Venezia. Braving the 35-degree weather and biting wind, they listened patiently as he delivered a pep talk in which he promised to create a series of political clubs in the name of his reborn Forza Italia party that will fight "for freedom." "We are missionaries of liberty," he shouted. "I promise that I shall never forget any of you and your demonstration. Long live Italy, long live Forza Italia, long live freedom!"

It is perhaps an unfortunate play on words that on Wednesday the Italian Senate had to vote on Senator Silvio Berlusconi's "decadenza"--that is, whether or not to disbar him from the Senate, thus stripping away his parliamentary status and hence some of his continuing legal protections and his right to run for office. Even in Italian the word also refers to the expiration of a warranty for, say, a washing machine. But to take the word in English as related to decadence also gives an idea of an unpleasant situation that has gone on far too long, with Parliament tied up with endless debates over Berlusconi even as the government should be facing the serious problems of the economy that afflict the nation. It is time for a sea change away from decadence and back to the creativity that was a desired hallmark of earlier postwar politics.

Silvio Berlusconi has dominated the Italian political scene for a total of twenty years. So what now? He still commands the loyalty of as many as 7 million voters--much fewer than in the past. After today's expulsion he will have to face, probably in April, the consequences of his definitive conviction August 1 for fiscal fraud. He is most definitely not out of politics - on the contrary, he still hopes somehow to be premier - but in theory will not be able to run for office. In April point he can choose between accepting house arrest or accepting to perform public service under the control of social workers. The notion does not please him: a priest's suggesting, "Let him come here and clean our toilets," sent Berlusconi into a fury, saying that he would not be humiliated in that way.

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