

Q: The government has been largely paralyzed by infighting. But now, with Mr, Berlusconi's retreat, the stability of the government has been confirmed. Some believe that it implies a closure of the era of Berlusconi, and Mr, Letta is now facing a easier working environment; while other hold that not much has changed for Mr. Letta because Berlusconi remains unpredictable ally in this shaky collation ,and Mr. Letta's Democratic party has still rely on outside support for a majority in Senate. Which one do you agree with, and why?

A:

Silvio Berlusconi has given his name to an era, but now—barring unforeseen circumstances—that era will likely pass into history.

It is interesting that Berlusconi has generally been accused of acting exclusively for his own personal interest and not in that of the country. This has been true particularly with regard to the justice system, which in Italy is very complicated. Foreigners may wonder why so many people continue to vote for him despite his troubles with the magistrates. Berlusconi has argued that the magistrates have been waging a crusade against him, which has increased his support in the country. Besides his personal charisma, many Italians sympathize with Berlusconi because they have been caught up in a system that is byzantine, labyrinthine, and frequently unfair. The ills of the Italian justice system are well documented, as are the solutions; they have not been implemented, because Berlusconi is more interested in suiting them to his personal and financial interests rather than to the country's benefit.

After many years the justice system finally succeeded in condemning Berlusconi on corruption charges. A law passed with the help of his own People of Liberty party (PdL) mandated that anyone condemned to four years or more could be removed from Parliament, in Berlusconi's case the Senate. Berlusconi attempted to save himself by arguing that the law was applied retroactively in his case, an argument that was rejected. At the same time President Giorgio Napolitano refused to grant him a pardon and strongly supported the government. Berlusconi has appealed to the European Union, but in the meantime a Senate commission moved toward his expulsion from that body.

It was at that point that Berlusconi ordered his party to vote against the Enrico Letta cabinet, which would have resulted in the government's fall and in new elections that he claimed his party would win. At this point the center-left Democratic Party (PD), popular opinion, and international forces mobilized to argue that the government's fall and a new electoral campaign would have worsened the Italian economic situation just when some signs of revival had appeared and would send the spread between Italian and German government bonds soaring. This alarm caused a division within Berlusconi's PdL with some of its most prominent leaders—including his *dauphin*, Interior Minister Angelino Alfano—turning against Berlusconi. These leaders had the consensus of other PdL Senators, variously estimated in number from 26 to 40, who would disobey Berlusconi's orders and vote confidence in the Letta government. The Senate is the crucial body involved because the center-left has a majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Faced with this revolt, Berlusconi reversed himself and ordered the entire party

delegation to vote for Letta, who received a 235 to 70 majority.

These are the events that have prompted observers to argue that the Berlusconi era is over. As Berlusconi prepared to serve one year of community service for his conviction, the revolt seriously shook his power. More important, however, the realization that continued instability gravely imperiled the country's future has led to a bipartisan commitment to pass reforms that will allow Italy to end the deep economic crisis in which the country finds itself. Although Italy has been slower than other countries to climb out of the economic hole, there are bright spots, including the country's continued strong export position, if reforms on the table are implemented.

But Berlusconi is not out of the picture, still wields enormous power, and is very resourceful politically. The PdL is still sticking to its program of fighting higher taxes (particularly property taxes on primary residences and an increase in the VAT that recently went into effect), and is at constant war with the PD over this and other issues. The recent political developments have weakened Berlusconi and given the country more political stability—at least for the moment. The differences between center-left and center-right remain strong, the discordant debates will continue, and Berlusconi will likely pounce on any errors the government commits.

In short, the “war” will continue, but Berlusconi has been severely weakened, and while the atmosphere in which the political battles will take place will continue to be stormy, it is likely to be somewhat calmer. Nevertheless, recent events have brought the hope that the Italian version of a “Grand Coalition” has gained the breathing room to rescue the country from the most terrible economic crisis since the Great Depression and will permit the PdL to prepare for the post-Berlusconi era.

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