
Italy's centre-right

'I am back,' says Berlusconi after court victory

JAMES POLITI — ROME

Italy's highest court handed Silvio Berlusconi a big legal victory, confirming his acquittal on charges of sex with an underage prostitute and abuse of office, fuelling his supporters' hopes of an unlikely political revival.

The 78-year-old former prime minister and media tycoon had been initially convicted of paying for sex with Karima "Ruby" El-Mahroug, a Moroccan nightclub dancer who was 17 at the time, and sentenced to seven years in prison.

But Mr Berlusconi was cleared on appeal last year, mainly on the grounds that he did not know Ms El-Mahroug was a minor. That acquittal was confirmed for good last night.

"Now that this sad chapter is over, I am back on the pitch to build, alongside Forza Italia and the centre-right, an Italy that is better, more just and more free," Mr Berlusconi said on his Facebook page yesterday.

Mr Berlusconi was forced to step down as prime minister in the middle of the eurozone crisis in November 2011 and his legal travails, as well as the controversy over the so-called "bunga bunga" sex parties that he held throughout his time in office, contributed to his downfall.

Mr Berlusconi was also found guilty of

tax fraud and sentenced to a one-year term of part-time community service in an Alzheimer's clinic, which ended last week.

Even so, Mr Berlusconi has remained at the helm of the centre-right Forza Italia party, which he founded more than two decades ago. But while it was once the dominant force in Italian politics, Forza Italia's support has declined dramatically in recent years and it has been eclipsed on the right by a resurgence of

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the anti-immigrant, anti-euro Northern League.

Some Forza Italia politicians have already split from the party and others are openly questioning Mr Berlusconi's leadership. Meanwhile, Italy's centre-left has taken advantage of the disarray on the right, with Matteo Renzi rising to power last year on a platform of sweeping economic and political reform.

But the end of Mr Berlusconi's tax fraud sentence and his definitive acquittal in the "Ruby" case might mean he will make a last-ditch attempt at a politi-

cal comeback, however difficult it may be, with the first test coming in May's regional elections.

Mr Berlusconi remains banned from public office but has challenged the decision at the European Court for Human Rights.

"The acquittal is a victory for liberty and truth. Forza Italia can start over now, stronger than ever, with its president," tweeted Andrea Mandelli, a senator from Mr Berlusconi's party.

Others were sceptical. Corrado Passera, a former Italian banker and government minister under Mario Monti who is trying to create his own centre-right political movement, was dismissive.

"The acquittal is good for him but the political judgment should not change. He betrayed the liberal revolution and cannot be the new voice that Italy needs," Mr Passera said, also on Twitter.

Indeed, the high court ruling may have come too late to restore Mr Berlusconi's standing, both domestically and internationally, a reality even he acknowledged in his reaction.

"I have nothing to blame myself for ... but there is regret for the countless damage inflicted by this story, not just on me and my family but all Italians, the public life of our country, and our image in the world," Mr Berlusconi said.