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## La Dolce Berlusconi

By [Anne Applebaum](#)  
Tuesday, October 13, 2009

Silvio Berlusconi has been accused of bribery, tax evasion, corruption and subversion of the press. His wife has left him on the grounds that he consorts with prostitutes and holds orgies at his villa in Sardinia. He makes embarrassing jokes (and then [repeats them](#), as he did with the one about President Obama's "suntan") and periodically disappears to undergo more plastic surgery. He is at war with the Italian legal establishment, with almost all of the journalists who don't work for him, and with the Catholic Church. Last week the Italian constitutional court [lifted his immunity](#) from prosecution, which means Italians can look forward to a whole new series of lawsuits and scandals.



Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi greets supporters at a rally. (By Tano Pecoraro -- Associated Press)

Yet by far the most interesting thing about the Italian prime minister is this: Italians keep voting for him. The somewhat ragged coalition he leads -- Il Popolo della Libertà, the People of Freedom -- won a decisive general election victory in 2008 and trounced the opposition in European parliamentary elections in June 2009. Whether or not you agree with his daughter, [who says](#) he "will go down in the history books as the longest-serving and most loved leader in the history of the Italian republic," you cannot argue with the fact that he has been the dominant force in Italian politics since he first became prime minister in 1994. But why?

There seem to be several answers, some of which are connected to the weird impasse that brought him to power in the first place. In the early 1990s, Italy's political system unraveled following a series of judicial investigations that revealed profound corruption permeating the entire Italian political class. As a result, all of the major political parties and all of the leading political figures vanished overnight, sometimes literally: Bettino Craxi, leader of the Italian socialist party for nearly 20 years, fled to Tunisia to escape prison and eventually died in exile.

Berlusconi stepped into the vacuum, promising to talk about issues no one else had dared touch -- notably mass immigration from North Africa -- and to deal with problems no one else could solve, including the convoluted tax laws and notorious bureaucracy. But in retrospect it is clear that Berlusconi (whose record on actually carrying out any of his reforms is pretty slim) has also brought the counterrevolution: He had made his career under the old system -- as had many other people -- and, once in power, he brought an end

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to the judicial purge. Italians, journalist Beppe Severgnini told me, "were afraid of their own bravery." They were also afraid of chaos, and in a country that has had, on average, a different government every year for the past six decades, Berlusconi, a familiar figure for many years, has come to represent a kind of stability. The Italian left is disorganized, the center-right is paralyzed, and a lot of people prefer the devil they know.

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Of course, Berlusconi also has at least one tool that none of the others have: popular television. He controls three mainstream channels and various digital channels because he owns them. He also in effect controls state television because he is the prime minister. There are newspapers, magazines and late-night talk shows that criticize him, but they don't reach the same numbers of people: Much like his friend Vladimir Putin, the Russian prime minister, he doesn't try to exert influence over all of the media, just the media that reach most of the voters.

That may not determine the outcome of elections, but it sure helps. It has [also made Italy](#) the center of the largest movement for press freedom outside the former Soviet Union.

But in the end, even that dominance can't explain all of his votes. There has to be something appealing about Berlusconi himself as well. Severgnini has called him a "mirror" of modern Italy, and one sees [what he means](#): Nouveau riche (like almost everyone in the country) and not afraid to show it off (remember that Sardinian villa); a lover of women and soccer (he owns the team A.C. Milan); loyal to his friends (even protecting them from the law); and clearly enjoying himself at those parties and on his yacht, Berlusconi leads a kind of caricature version of the ideal Italian life. And precisely because he is a caricature, he gets away with things that other people can't. One hears Italians regale one another with Berlusconi stories and then howl with laughter.

Besides, with Berlusconi as your prime minister, you don't have to take yourself too seriously. You don't have to trouble yourself with geopolitics or the state of the planet, or poverty and failed states. You can stay at home, remain unserious and argue about the latest legal scandal. And maybe that, too, is part of the Italian prime minister's appeal.

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