

As Berlusconi's Party Supports Embattled Chief, Critics Retaliate

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO
Published: August 16, 2013

Posters in support of Silvio Berlusconi, the embattled former prime minister, are appearing on billboards and bus stops in major Italian cities and along highways. An aerial advertising blitz along Italy's coastline was timed to coincide with Ferragosto, the sacrosanct mid-August holiday that sends Italians to the seaside.

It is all the work of Mr. Berlusconi's People of Liberty party, still smarting from a recent upper court verdict upholding his conviction for tax fraud, which would prevent him from holding public office.

But even as small planes flew over crowded beaches — towing banners with the words “Forza Silvio, Forza Italia” (Go Silvio, Go Italy), to mark dissent with what Mr. Berlusconi's supporters believe to be a politically motivated conviction — critics were mounting a counteroffensive.

In Tuscany, lawmakers with the Democratic Party handed out leaflets citing the Italian Constitution, to underscore the idea that everyone is equal before the law. “Even Senator Berlusconi is an Italian citizen,” the leaflet read, a response to repeated calls from Mr. Berlusconi's party for a presidential pardon for its leader, who continues to protest his innocence.

“It was what we jokingly called an antiaircraft attack,” said Enrico Rossi, the Democratic Party president of the Tuscany Region, who handed out leaflets in the seaside resort of Viareggio.

He said that he had been asked by one member of his party to close off the airspace over Tuscany to the pro-Berlusconi planes. “I explained I didn't have this power, but that I could participate in the leaflet distribution,” which also took place in several other Tuscan cities, Mr. Rossi said in a telephone interview. “We want to respect the dismay of many of Berlusconi's supporters, but we cannot allow that he be treated differently from other Italian citizens,” he said.

At one beach near Rome, some jeered when the planes flew overhead on Thursday, said a person who was there. And Daniele Dal Bon, the owner of Air Wallace, one of the companies hired to fly the pro-Berlusconi banners for hundreds of miles along Italy's eastern and western coasts, said he had read messages on Italian blogs expressing hope that the planes would crash or that someone would shoot them down.

“Not nice comments, but in Italy it’s normal,” Mr. Dal Bon said, noting his company was apolitical. “We’ll advertise anything as long as it’s legal — a company slogan or even marriage proposals.”

Mr. Berlusconi was sentenced to four years in prison on the charge, though that was commuted to one, and he has been banned for a still undetermined number of years from holding public office. The issue of how, or even whether, he will actually serve out his sentence weighs heavily on the fate of Prime Minister Enrico Letta’s broad coalition government, which counts the People of Liberty Party among its ranks.

Despite a series of legal setbacks — including a recent conviction for paying to have sex with a minor — Mr. Berlusconi continues to enjoy the support of quite a few Italian voters, who gave his coalition nearly a third of the vote in February elections.

A Senate committee will decide in coming weeks whether Mr. Berlusconi will immediately lose his status as a senator. The law banning him from public office was passed in December, and his lawyers argue that the law should not apply retroactively.

This week, hoping to avert political turmoil, Italy’s president, Giorgio Napolitano, issued a statement saying that justice had to be served and convictions implemented, but that he would consider the possibility of a pardon while respecting the independence of the judiciary.

He said that he had not received an official request for a pardon, and that such a request would be evaluated through the proper channels. In any event, the president said, Mr. Berlusconi is eligible to serve his sentence through some form of community service, or house arrest. Mr. Napolitano ruled out elections in the near future, renewing his backing for Mr. Letta’s government and its agenda of economic and electoral overhaul.

But Mr. Berlusconi’s supporters want Italians to know that their leader is still in charge.

“There is a chain of events that led to this summer campaign,” said Antonio Palmieri, Mr. Berlusconi’s campaign manager and social media strategist, citing the recent “unjust and unfair conviction.” He added, “We aim to show that he is still in the game, and that he is not alone, people are still with Berlusconi.”

Berlusconi supporters see the summer offensive as a preamble to the programmed revamping of his party next month, when People of Liberty is expected to return to its original name — Forza Italia, coined by Mr. Berlusconi when he entered politics 20 years ago. It became People of Liberty in 2007, when Forza Italia merged with the National Alliance.

“Sometimes to go forward in life you have to take a few steps back, and that’s what’s happening with the return to Forza Italia,” said Mr. Palmieri, who hopes the return to what was a winning strategy will attract new voters, as well as those who have become jaded by Italy’s occasionally bizarre politics. “We want to return to the spirit of the origins; the desire to reform Italy is the same as it was 20 years ago.”