

Berlusconi blasts court for jailing ally

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has lashed out at judges who jailed a close associate for corruption.

Cesare Previti, Mr Berlusconi's former personal lawyer, was imprisoned for 11 years late on Tuesday.

Previti, a member of parliament, was found guilty of using bribery to try to influence two takeover battles - one of which favoured Mr Berlusconi's Fininvest holding company.

Mr Berlusconi was originally charged in the same case - dating back to a 1991 struggle for control of the Mondadori publishing company - but was acquitted under Italy's statute of limitations in 2000.

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Silvio Berlusconi

The other case, known by the initials IMI-SIR, has no connection with Mr Berlusconi's businesses.

Mr Berlusconi, who has long accused Milan magistrates of being "red judges" biased against him, expressed his "personal solidarity" with his jailed ally.

"The politicisation of a certain magistrature, aimed at determining our political life, is a problem that must be resolved for the good of the country, for its institutions and for Italian citizens," Mr Berlusconi said in a statement.

"Today's conviction only confirms this persecution."

Previti, a former defence chief in a Berlusconi government, also denounced the verdict as "judicial persecution".

This is judicial persecution - an innocent was sentenced

Cesare Previti

"An innocent was sentenced," he said.

Previti's lawyers are launching an appeal against his conviction.

"It's a profoundly unjust verdict even though we were expecting it," one of Previti's lawyers Giorgio Perroni was quoted as saying.

Previti has also claimed that the Milan courts are biased against him. He sought unsuccessfully to have the cases moved to Perugia under a controversial law passed in November last year.

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National Association of Magistrates

Italian judges hit back at Mr Berlusconi's comments.

"Nobody is allowed to discredit the judiciary - particularly he who, like the prime minister, is occupying the highest political job," said a statement from the National Association of Magistrates.

Mr Berlusconi's political opponents are expected to seize on the ruling to put pressure on him.

However, one political analyst said public opinion might not be greatly influenced.

"It won't weigh enormously heavily on Italian public opinion, because supporters will blame the 'red' judges. The real problem will be abroad, particularly as (Italy) is about to become the president of EU," said James Walston, a politics professor at the American University of Rome.

Previti is still a co-defendant with Mr Berlusconi in another corruption trial in Milan, concerning a struggle for control of the SME state-owned food company.

A verdict in that trial is expected in the summer.

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