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## Berlusconi immunity greeted with fury, frustration

By Luke Baker



ROME, June 19 — A decision to grant legal immunity to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has spared him potential embarrassment during Italy's coming EU presidency, but provoked outrage in Italy and beyond on Thursday.

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**Italy**

Italian commentators called the new bill, which the lower house of parliament approved late on Wednesday, an abuse of power, and critics drew parallels with George Orwell's parable against totalitarianism, "Animal Farm."

"From today, Berlusconi can no longer face trial...as a citizen, therefore, he is no longer equal to everyone else," left-leaning newspaper La Repubblica wrote in a front-page editorial. "The law is no longer equal for all."

The bill, already passed by the upper house Senate, was rushed through parliament in record time and is set to be signed into law by Italy's president in the coming days, before Italy takes over the rotating European Union presidency on July 1.

Giving his first reaction, Berlusconi welcomed the passage of the bill as he arrived in Greece on Thursday ahead of a summit of EU leaders.

"It brings Italy into line with other European countries," he told reporters, adding that while some people were working to raise Italy's prestige on the world stage, others were constantly trying to discredit the country.

In Germany, the Berliner Zeitung newspaper condemned the way the vote had been rammed through and said it was clearly designed to save Berlusconi from possible

conviction.

"Berlusconi has used his deputies as gullible voters in order to save his neck," the paper wrote in a commentary.

#### **BRIBERY CHARGES**

The bill -- which was actually first proposed by the left and brings Italy into line with France and other EU nations -- gives legal immunity to those holding the five highest offices of state and suspends any court cases under way.

Berlusconi is the only one of the five on trial and will be immune at least until his current term ends in 2006 -- barring any government collapse -- and longer if he is re-elected.

He is charged with bribing judges to sway a decision in a contested corporate takeover battle in the mid-1980s, nearly a decade before he entered politics. He denies the charges.

A verdict had been expected in the next few weeks, during Italy's six-month EU presidency, which could have created deep embarrassment if Berlusconi were to have been found guilty.

While he is now spared that threat, his co-defendants in the same case are not protected. Prosecutors have called for sentences of more than 11 years for other defendants.

Il Giornale, a newspaper run by Berlusconi's brother, hailed the immunity bill as a sound move that would put a stop to "judicial witch-hunting" and said the government could now oversee its EU presidency with a greater degree of serenity.

But Italians on the street were angry and frustrated at the bill, which film director Nanni Moretti, an opposition icon, called it the worst bill the Berlusconi government had so far created.

"What do I think?" asked construction worker Mario Artone. "I think it's a huge negative and to the detriment of everybody. Democracy just doesn't exist here any more."  
(Additional reporting by Crispian Balmer in Greece)

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