

Thousands protest against Berlusconi

By Rachel Sanderson in Milan
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Demonstrators attend a rally near Milan call for the prime minister to resign and hold a banner saying "Berlusconi go away! You steal our dignity!"

Thousands of protesters converged on Milan over the weekend to call for Silvio Berlusconi to resign as prime minister in the face of an escalating corruption and sex scandal.

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The rallies came at the end of a week of mounting judicial accusations about "Rubygate", as Italy has come to call the latest investigations into Mr Berlusconi's relations with suspected prostitutes.

Mr Berlusconi and his rightwing allies also suffered a damaging defeat in parliament on Thursday over proposed changes to Italy's tax system, which opposition leaders said confirmed the sense of a paralysed government undermined by scandals.

Converging at an arena on the outskirts of Milan on Saturday, speakers including Roberto Saviano, the anti-mafia journalist, Umberto Eco, author and academic, and Paul Ginsborg, Anglo-Italian historian, led thousands of protesters in calling on Mr Berlusconi to resign "for the sake of Italy".

"We have come here to defend the honour of Italy," Mr Eco said to some of the longest applause of the event. "To prove to foreigners we are not all dummies."

More than 9,000 protesters, some waving Italian flags, filled the Palasharp arena in Milan to capacity, while crowds of several hundred people were camped outside the gates listening to the event broadcast through loud speakers.

At a rally outside Mr Berlusconi's personal residence near Milan on Sunday, people carried banners reading "Berlusconi Get Out" and "Quit Buffoon".

Around 100 protesters, some of them throwing bottles, clashed with police, as the crowd sought to get to the gates of the prime minister's villa, according to Italian news reports.

Yet despite numerous references by the speakers and those in the crowd to the popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, the rallies served as much to highlight the crisis among Italy's left and the traditionally powerful intellectual elite that has failed to coalesce around a figure to mount significant opposition to Mr Berlusconi.

Mr Ginsborg, when asked if he saw a "springtime" in the opposition movement, said: "Honestly, no".

"I've come here because I no longer know my country," said Roberto Boara, 30, a bank employee in Milan.

"We are a member of Europe only in terms of geography, in culture and politics we have become like an undeveloped country".

Mr Berlusconi on Friday rejected a request by prosecutors to search his offices in Milan that are suspected to have been used by his accountant to manage payments to alleged prostitutes, including an underage Moroccan with the stage name of Ruby.

The prime minister is also accused of abuse of office in persuading a Milan police chief to release the Moroccan teenager from custody last May. He rejects the accusations.

Whether they search the billionaire prime minister's offices or not, prosecutors said they intended to present their case to a preliminary judge this coming week.

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