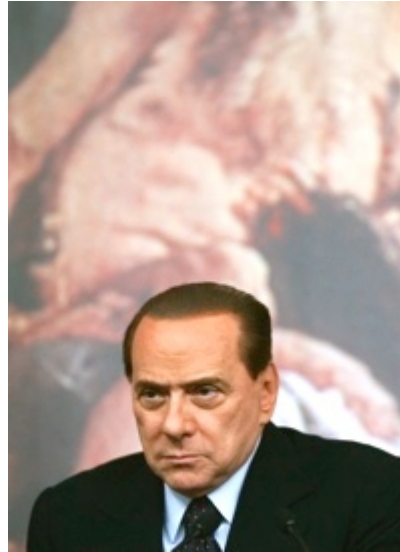




Berlusconi Charged in Under-age Prostitution Scandal

Scandal-plagued Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi will be tried in April on charges of corruption and paying for sex with an under-age prostitute. The evidence is reportedly so overwhelming that the prosecutors secured a fast-track trial for the billionaire leader, bypassing the normal preliminary hearing.



Berlusconi has come under fire numerous times during his 17-year off-and-on reign over allegations of wild sex parties, prostitution, bribery, tax evasion, corruption, and more. Thus far, however, he has avoided convictions that stick and has emerged relatively whole. Polls [show](#) Berlusconi's approval rating is still high, and if another election were held, he would still probably win.

This time around, the media baron is accused of paying for sex with a then-17-year-old Moroccan exotic dancer named Karima "Ruby" El Mahroug during one of the parties at his estate. He called the charges "groundless" and continues to deny any wrongdoing, acknowledging that the girl was at his house and that she was paid thousands of euros, but claiming no sex took place. Prostitution is not illegal in Italy, and the age of consent is 14, but a prostitute must be 18 or older.

On top of the paying-for-under-age-sex charge, Berlusconi is accused of abusing his office. After the alleged prostitute was arrested for an unrelated theft, charges were filed against Berlusconi for using his political position to secure her immediate release.

He claims he believed the girl was related to former Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, and that he was therefore simply attempting to avoid an international diplomatic incident. But critics of the 74-year-old political boss, including magistrates involved in the case, simply aren't buying it.

Supporters of the Prime Minister — especially members of his political party — have blasted the accusations, claiming Berlusconi is the victim of a politically motivated "witch hunt." Opponents, however, are calling for his immediate resignation. Berlusconi, meanwhile, maintains that he is innocent, accusing the judiciary of a "moral coup." So far he has refused to step down.

"This is nothing less than an attack on the people's sovereignty and on an institution of the state," [said](#) Education Minister Mariastella Gelmini, a Berlusconi supporter. "One state power is trying to overturn the popular vote, thus undermining a fundamental principle of all democracies." The Justice Minister has also strongly condemned the prosecution.

After Berlusconi's foes staged rallies in some 200 cities over the weekend supposedly to restore the dignity of Italian women, he [fought back](#), telling a TV station he owns that opposition parties "used any pretext to try to bring down an adversary they cannot beat at the polls."



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on February 16, 2011

The Prime Minister's vast media empire has largely downplayed or ignored the allegations, a factor which some reports [credit](#) with minimizing the political damage Berlusconi has suffered as a result of years of scandals. He blames a left-wing conspiracy for accusations.

Berlusconi's former wife, who left him in 2009 over similar allegations of paying for sex with young women, asserted that the Prime Minister had a "sickness" for "hanging out with underage girls," Bloomberg news service [reported](#). The *Christian Science Monitor* [reported](#) that prosecutors had intercepted phone calls allegedly proving Berlusconi spent hundreds of thousands of euros on a "parade of glamorous young women."

"I can only say that it's a farce. But I am not worried about myself. I am a rich man who could spend his time building hospitals for children around the world, as I have always wanted," Berlusconi [insisted](#), calling the accusations "disgusting and disgraceful." He also claimed prosecutors involved in the case had "subversive purposes."

A three-member panel — all women judges — will [hear](#) the case in Milan in early April. Berlusconi's defense team argued that the court did not have jurisdiction because the alleged crime took place at his mansion in the province of Monza, but the judges disagreed. The Prime Minister does not have to be physically present in the court during the trial, but what will happen remains to be seen.

If convicted, Berlusconi, one of the world's richest men, could theoretically spend several years in prison — up to 12, in fact. But analysts [predict](#) he will never see the inside of an Italian jail. The embattled Prime Minister is also [facing](#) unrelated fraud charges.

Photo: Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi listens to a reporter's question during a press conference at the Chigi Premier's palace, in Rome, Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2011: AP Images



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