

Bye, bye, bunga bunga?

Prosecutors have called for Silvio Berlusconi to be jailed for six years and banned from political office. Is it all over for the crooning Casanova?
Anthony Ham reports from Milan.

When they come to write the political obituary of Silvio Berlusconi, it will be a story in which king and court jester are played by the same man. The man Italians know as Il Cavaliere (The Knight) has transformed Italian politics into a performance art.

For more than a decade, this fabulously wealthy media mogul – he is, according to *Forbes* magazine, the 169th-richest person in the world with a net worth of \$6 billion – has strutted Italy's political stage, revelling in his reputation as the buffoon living off ill-gotten gains.

At the same time, the showbiz Berlusconi has lurched from the sublime to the ridiculous, from owning one of Europe's most successful soccer clubs to recording three albums of cheesy love songs, from being Italy's third-longest-serving prime minister of the modern era to hosting sordid poolside parties involving under-age girls. No one has done more to promote the idea of Italy as a theatre of the absurd than Berlusconi.

He has compared himself variously with Napoleon (“Only Napoleon did more than I have done but I am definitely taller”) and Jesus (“I am the Jesus Christ of politics. I am a patient victim, I put up with everyone, I sacrifice myself for everyone”).

He has also shown a rare abil-

ity to offend and to appear oblivious to the fallout. He once told a German member of the European Parliament: “I know in Italy there is a producer producing a film on Nazi concentration camps. I will suggest you for the role of kapo. You would be perfect.”

He told an African priest he had “a nice tan”, announced “it's better to be fond of pretty girls than to be gay” and told the New York Stock Exchange Italy was the perfect place for foreign investment because “we have the most beautiful secretaries in the world”.



And yet, as difficult as it is now to imagine, when Berlusconi stormed the bastions of power in the 1990s he represented a clean break with the past and seemed to many Italians to be an exciting step in the right direction.

He took on and beat the outmoded state monopolies that dominated the Italian media.

He broke apart the status quo that had paralysed moribund Italian politics for decades.

And as he did so, he spoke in the earthy street talk to which many Italians could relate.

Later he would come to resemble that which he overthrew, elevating scandal to the defining norm of Italian public life.

And now he faces the most serious threat to his political future, as he confronts allegations he paid for sex with under-age girls during the now-infamous “bunga-bunga” parties at his private villa outside Milan.

Indeed, a Milan court was told this week that Berlusconi's private disco featured not only aspiring showgirls performing striptease acts as sexy nuns and nurses, but one woman dressed up as US President Barack Obama.

According to the first public sworn testimony by 20-year-old Karima el-Mahroug, the Moroccan woman at the centre of the scandal, up to 20 women dressed in costumes would dance provocatively in front of Berlusconi before stripping to their underwear.

But for all his setbacks and scandals, Berlusconi continues to

stalk the corridors of power and rumours of his political death are very much exaggerated.

Silvio Berlusconi was born into a middle-class Milan family in 1936, the eldest of three children. His father was a bank employee, his mother a housewife. At the time of Berlusconi's birth, Mussolini ruled Italy, Europe was in recession and World War II was imminent.

Sent to a strict religious school, he completed his classmates' homework in return for a fee. Later he paid his way through university by selling vacuum cleaners. As a law student at the Università Statale in Milan, he played the bass, moonlighted as a crooner on cruise ships and graduated with honours. Clearly Berlusconi was, from a very early age, both performer and clever operator in the field of his choosing.

Berlusconi has always made much of his rise as a self-made man, a narrative associated more with the brashness of America than the staid political traditions of Old Europe. That he was neither born into old money nor groomed by the old guard of politics has been both the source of his appeal and a reason why he has so many enemies.

It was construction that launched him into the world of business. In the late 1960s, using money borrowed from his father's bank and at a time when the Italian economy was booming, he built Milano Due (Milan Two), a 4000-apartment residential complex