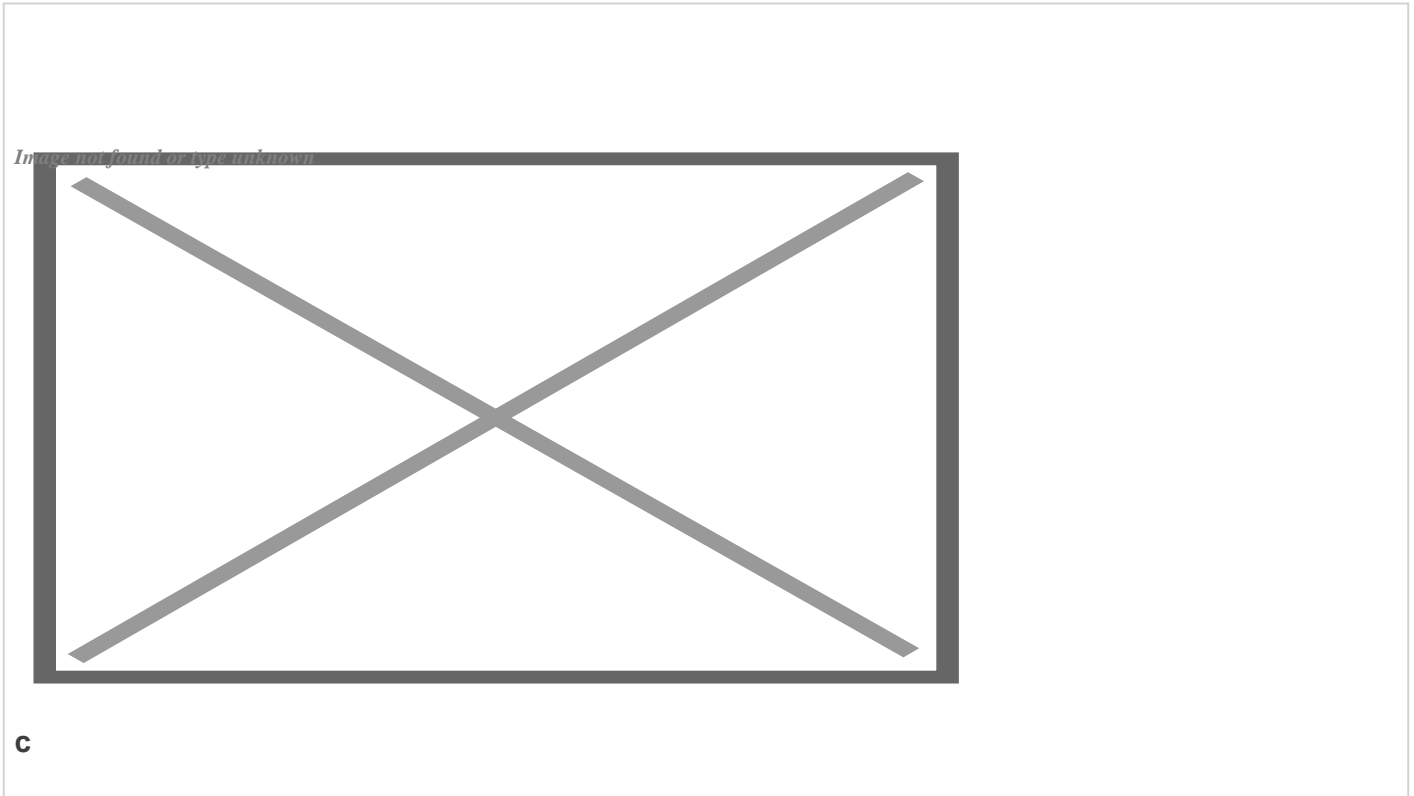


Italians bid farewell -- and good riddance -- to Silvio Berlusconi



Milan, June 14 (RHC)-- It is an official day of national mourning in Italy with flags flying half-mast to mark the death of Silvio Berlusconi, the country's most divisive and charismatic public figure who dominated politics, business and sport for decades.

Tens of thousands of supporters of the controversial four-time prime minister gathered for a state funeral on Wednesday in Milan to pay their respects to the so-called "Knight" – a man who embodied the modern era of self-made moguls and remained a darling to many Italians despite a history of legal woes, sex scandals and international gaffes.

Berlusconi died on Monday aged 86 at the San Raffaele hospital in Milan. He had been admitted there on Friday for preplanned tests related to a chronic form of leukaemia. His death came as a shock to many. Despite his frail health, Berlusconi's defining presence on Italy's political scene – coupled with his exuberance and perpetual ultra-tanned look – had almost created an illusion that he would have lived in perpetuity, as television host Bruno Vespa put it on Tuesday night.

"We will all miss him, even those who criticised him – and even cartoonists who won't have anything to sketch now," said Tiziana Guerra, who sells flowers close to the Duomo Gothic cathedral, a 14th-century architectural masterpiece where Berlusconi's funeral will take place.

The church will host about 2,000 people, including Italian President Sergio Mattarella and European Union Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni. It is not clear yet which world leaders will be attending the event but state-run news agency ANSA reported that Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban will be present.

Meanwhile, as newspapers and broadcasters remarked endlessly on “The end of an era”, supporters headed to Villa Arcore, Berlusconi’s luxurious mansion outside of Milan, where a small private wake attended by close family and friends took place on Tuesday. Political flags, bouquets of flowers and a large banner reading “Thank you for ever President” line the area outside the house.

Berlusconi stormed into Italian politics in 1994 with an eight-minute video announcing the founding of a new right-wing party, Forza Italia (Go Italy). His goal was to build a new political movement on the ashes of the post-1945 First Republic which had been decimated by a wave of corruption scandals that had left Italians distrustful of the political elite.

Already a successful entrepreneur, media tycoon and owner of the successful AC Milan football team, Berlusconi sought to win the hearts of Italians by using radically different language – that was direct, modern and populist. He broke away from a decades-old tradition that wanted politicians to have a role in educating the electorate and used his allure instead to directly engage with the people. In the process, he reoriented politics away from the ideological background of the traditional parties and onto a cultural one.

His most powerful weapon was Mediaset, a popular cable TV network that broke the information monopoly held till then by state-run media. He brought United States soap operas and shows starring female entertainers into the houses of Italians, accelerating a cultural shift that had already started in the 1980s.

But the right-wing ideologue of Italy was best known for his off-the-wall comments. Here are just a few:

“I am the Jesus Christ of politics,” Berlusconi told his supporters in 2006, according to Italian media. “I am a patient victim. I put up with everyone. I sacrifice myself for everyone.”

He also compared himself to the French leader Napoleon Bonaparte that same year. “Only Napoleon did more than I have done,” he told an Italian TV talk show. “But I am definitely taller.”

During a group photograph at an informal European Union summit in Spain in 2002, Berlusconi raised two fingers behind the head of the Spanish foreign minister, Josep Pique, in the traditional Latin gesture for a cuckold.

In 2005, Berlusconi said he had tried to charm Finland’s president, Tarja Halonen, to give up her country’s claim to host the new European Food Safety Authority. “I had to use all my playboy tactics, even if they have not been used for some time,” he said.

In 2010, then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel was also insulted by Berlusconi when he called her an “unf*****e lardarse”, according to Italian newspapers. He also told German lawmaker and Social Democrat Martin Schulz: “There is in Italy a man producing a film on the Nazi concentration camps. I would like to suggest you for the role of kapo. You’d be perfect.” A kapo was a concentration camp inmate who was given privileges for supervising prisoner work gangs.

While visiting survivors of an earthquake in the central Italian region of Abruzzo in 2009, Berlusconi said of the people in emergency tents: “They should look at it as a weekend of camping.”

In 2001, Berlusconi upset the Muslim world when he said the West “should be conscious of the superiority of our (Western) civilisation.” He said that while the West has a value system “that has given people widespread prosperity in those countries that embrace it and guarantees respect for human rights and

religion, ... this respect certainly does not exist in the Islamic countries.”

In 2010, the Vatican’s official newspaper condemned the Italian politician after he made an anti-Semitic “joke.”

At a motorcycle industry show in Milan in 2010, he said it was “better to be a beautiful girl rather than to be gay.” “As always, I work without interruption, and if occasionally I happen to look a beautiful girl in the face – it’s better to like beautiful girls than to be gay,” he said.

Berlusconi owned the Italian football club AC Milan from 1986 to 2017. In 2006, when Ukrainian striker Andriy Shevchenko moved to play for Chelsea, Berlusconi blamed Shevchenko’s wife.

“Shevchenko’s departure? It was neither wanted by us nor caused by the will of the player. He had to submit to the wishes of his wife. And we know that wives are often like kapos to whom we cannot say no.”

In 2022, the Italian leader told players of his Monza football team that he would bring “a bus of whores into the locker room” if they managed to beat a top Serie A rival. When AC Milan lost to Bologna in the 2008-2009 season, he commented on the club’s coach Carlo Ancelotti’s weight and said: “Ancelotti is chubby enough already. He has eaten so many panettones [type of Italian bread]. In any case, he can still have it this year.”

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