

Despite Charges, Berlusconi Vows to 'Forge Ahead'

ROME — A day after Italy's Constitutional Court struck down a law granting him immunity from prosecution, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi defiantly called the ruling "absurd" and said his government would "forge ahead calmly."

But now that he faces fresh prosecution on the corruption charges that have dogged him for decades, the normally charismatic and cheerful Mr. Berlusconi seemed anything but calm. In radio and television interviews, the prime minister, also under pressure from sex scandals and restiveness among his own center-right political allies, seemed so embattled that many Italian observers wondered if he was losing his grip — if not on the country then certainly on his temper.

Calling in to a television talk show on Wednesday, Mr. Berlusconi unleashed a highly unusual attack on the nation's mild-mannered president, Giorgio Napolitano, 84. He accused the president, who is normally considered above the political fray, of stacking the court with leftist judges — remarks that prompted Mr. Napolitano to call a meeting on Thursday with the speakers of the House and Senate to help avert an institutional crisis.

When a guest on the same show, Rosy Bindi, a high-ranking member of Parliament from the Democratic Party and a former health minister, protested that Mr. Berlusconi's attacks had undermined the authority of the office of the president, he told her curtly, "You are always more beautiful than intelligent."

Ms. Bindi, 58 and one of the few women in Italian public life with gray hair, responded dryly, "Mr. Prime Minister, I am a woman who is not at your disposal."

The drama underscored yet again that Mr. Berlusconi has always been more Technicolor than technocratic.

"If today Berlusconi acted more normally I'd say he had gone crazy," said Gianluca Nicoletti, a commentator for Radio 24 of Il Sole 24 Ore. "The paradox is that the people will think he's crazy if he started acting normally."

And the tenor of the debate provided yet more evidence that Italy's public life centered on the larger-than-life personality, and personal problems, of Mr. Berlusconi — to the exclusion of almost everything else.

"Whatever happens, good or bad, he's still the protagonist in all his glory," Mr. Nicoletti said.

Vowing over the radio on Thursday to show Italians that the charges against him were "ridiculous," the prime minister's voice seemed strained, his boundless charisma sapped.

"These two trials are laughable," he said. "I will defend myself in the courtrooms and ridicule my accusers, showing Italians my true grit."

Mr. Berlusconi has been defending himself for months against sex scandals involving young women, and at least one prostitute, who said they were paid to attend his lavish parties. The prime minister has denied

any impropriety but has also told Italians, “I’m not a saint.”

Wednesday’s ruling struck down as unconstitutional a law granting immunity from prosecution to the nation’s four highest officeholders while in office. The law had suspended Mr. Berlusconi’s participation in a corruption trial during which a judge in February found his British tax lawyer, David Mills, guilty of taking \$600,000 in exchange for false testimony. The case will now be retried before a new judge with Mr. Berlusconi as a defendant.

On Thursday, Mr. Berlusconi noted that he had been elected by a majority of the popular vote. He has a broad parliamentary majority. Since he entered politics in 1994, he has often accused magistrates of a leftist bias, an opinion his followers share.

Despite all the drama surrounding the ruling, few Italian commentators predicted a radical change of government. Nor did they think that the left would be able to capitalize on Mr. Berlusconi’s weaknesses. The main opposition grouping, the Democratic Party, is hampered by infighting and has yet to elect a new leader more than six months after its previous one resigned.

