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Ex-Italian PM Berlusconi gets 4-year prison term for tax fraud

Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi during an official visit to Villa Madama on January 18, 2011. A Milan court sentenced the flamboyant politician to four years in prison for tax evasion. Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi during an official visit to Villa Madama on January 18, 2011. A Milan court sentenced the flamboyant politician to four years in prison for tax evasion.

Rome (CNN) -- Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has survived political, corruption and sex scandals over the years, but on Friday, a Milan court sentenced the flamboyant politician to four years in prison for tax evasion.

Berlusconi, who is likely to appeal, called it an "unacceptable political sentence" in an interview that aired on CNN affiliate TGCOM24.

"I was convinced that I would get acquitted of an accusation that is far from the truth," he said. "This is a conviction I can easily define as political, incredible and even intolerable."

His trial, which also involved executives from Berlusconi's Mediaset television group and the head of a Swiss bank, concerned the purchase of TV rights for films that were then resold within the group at inflated prices.

Prosecutors said the scheme, involving about 3,000 American films, allowed those involved to avoid a major tax bill. They may have to pay a fine of up to €10 million (\$12.9 million) if the court's ruling is upheld.

Under the Italian legal system, Berlusconi and his fellow defendants have the right to appeal their sentence twice, in the appeals court and a higher court.

Also, because the case dates to July 2006, the statute of limitations will expire next year, meaning there is a good chance none of the defendants will serve any prison time.

Berlusconi, 76, resigned as prime minister in November amid his country's debt crisis, bringing to an apparent end an 18-year era in which he dominated Italian politics.

Through the years, he was accused of embezzlement, fraud and bribery, but he was never convicted until the tax evasion case.

He also faces trial on charges that he hired an underage prostitute and later tried to pull strings to get her out of jail when she was accused of theft.

The woman involved in the long-running case is the Moroccan dancer Karima el Mahroug, nicknamed "Ruby the Heart-stealer."

American movie star George Clooney had been expected to appear Friday as a defense witness in that case

but did not show up. The actor's representative said he would not be serving as a witness for Berlusconi.

