

Berlusconi primed for 'final bet' on his future

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is not rotten, and the
orchard is not rotten'

Giulio Tremonti
Finance minister

Italian politics

Amid a corruption inquiry and talk of an era ending, the premier could have a last shot at power, says Guy Dinmore

Seven months after a man hit him in the face with a souvenir model of Milan's Gothic cathedral, Silvio Berlusconi was set last night to return to the scene of the crime to receive a prize celebrating his charisma and leadership.

Tabloid newspapers were feverishly speculating whether Italy's prime minister - a former cruise ship crooner - would perform a duet in the Gothic cathedral alongside special guest Charles Aznavour. France's 86-year-old singer is currently on his farewell tour. With his government rupturing over corruption scandals, many in Italy are asking if the time has come for Mr Berlusconi, 73, to follow suit.

With open talk about the post-Berlusconi era, Italy has been plunged into debate over whether a spate of corruption investigations involving ministers, businessmen, judges and politicians - some with alleged links to the Mafia - signify a return to the early 1990s, when the political establishment collapsed amid the *tangentopoli* ("bribesville") scandals originating in Milan.

For Giulio Tremonti, finance minister and one of several potential successors to Mr Berlusconi, the latest inquiry into a suspected secret society involving the prime minister's closest allies is just about a few

"rotten apples", or at most a "boxful".

"But the tree is not rotten, and the orchard is not rotten," Mr Tremonti insisted in a weekend newspaper interview in which he reaffirmed his loyalty to the prime minister and ruled out talk of early elections or formation of an emergency government.

Eugenio Scalfari, the founder of the pro-opposition Repubblica daily newspaper, was scathing in reply. "This is the slime that is rising, the smell that comes from the palaces of power," he wrote, predicting that Mr Berlusconi would try to resolve his midterm crisis by calling snap elections.

Il Giornale, a daily in the Berlusconi family media empire, added to the sense that the prime minister was navigating treacherous waters by urging Gianfranco Fini, speaker of parliament and co-founder of the ruling People of Liberty party, to carry out his unspoken but clear threat to lead a breakaway faction out of the coalition.

Mr Fini, whose long career has seen him transit from neo-fascism to post-fascism and into the embrace of more centrist politics, remains a key player. But it is doubtful that he has the numbers in parliament to bring the government down, even if he wanted to.

Mr Berlusconi's biggest problem, insiders say, is not so much his difficulty in parliament in passing controversial legislation. Rather it is the sense that the system of *clientelismo* - the exchanging of favours - is breaking down under the zealous scrutiny of a relatively small group of prosecutors.

Having to accept the resignation of two ministers and a senior Treasury minister since May is seen as a sign that Mr Berlusconi is no longer strong enough to protect his own.

Andrea Romano, director of the Italia Futura think-tank - the brainchild of Luca di Montezemolo, the head of sports carmaker Ferrari, who is another possible leader in waiting - says the widening corruption investigations mark the end of what Italians call the Second Republic, which followed the collapse of the first amid the *tangentopoli* scandals. "We are seeing

the failure of the Second Republic to start a new political history in our country," he told the Financial Times. "More and more Italians are losing faith in their political parties."

Nonetheless Mr Romano believes that Mr Berlusconi, who burst on to the scene as the "anti-politician" in 1994, will make his "final bet" and call snap elections next spring.

If he can win a fresh mandate - and despite falling ratings he remains relatively popular - then Mr Berlusconi could crown his career by engineering his appointment by parliament as head of state in 2013.

Such speculation is fuelled by Pierluigi Bersani's ineffectual leadership of the opposition Democrats. Following his suggestion that the prime minister should "take a break" rather than spend the summer reorganising his party, Corriere della Sera, a mainstream daily newspaper, commented: "If this is all the head of the opposition can say then it would be better to summon the first passer-by on the street."

