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E.O. 12958: N/A
 TAGS: ECON, ETRD, KCOR, PGOV, IT
 SUBJECT: LUNCH WITH ITALIAN ACTIVIST BEPPE GRILLO: "NO HOPE
 FOR ITALY;" AN OBSESSION WITH CORRUPTION

REF: ROME 255

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Italian political comedian-turned activist Beppe Grillo began a recent discussion with EconOffs saying, "There is no hope for Italy." He believes only a complete replacement of the Italian political class can resolve Italy's corruption problems. Grillo is eccentric, yet appeals to Italy's downtrodden, reliably putting hundreds of thousands into the piazzas in protest against the established order. His comments were a striking contrast to those of Post's other more conventional interlocutors on economics, politics and particularly, corruption. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

2. (U) Giuseppe "Beppe" Grillo is a politically outspoken former comedian-activist who has achieved worldwide celebrity by excoriating Italian politicians in his daily blog, and by prompting a very well-attended (one hundred fifty thousand plus by his count) public rally last fall protesting GOI corruption. The subject of recent features in the New Yorker and other American press, the UK's Observer rated him one of

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Martin McLean, Senior Reviewer

3. (SBU) Grillo is blunt, even profane, but his direct and often trenchant accusations contrast sharply with the timid and indirect analyses of corruption offered by others in the Italian political spectrum. He has galvanized a previously silent section of public opinion and channeled the Italian public's outrage at entrenched government corruption and the political elite's inability to improve the country's condition. In this way, he has created an alternative forum for discussion on issues that are not being addressed by mainstream media. Embassy staff recently had the opportunity to exchange views with Grillo on corruption in Italy and a wide-range of other subjects during a lunch at ECOMIN's residence.

CORRUPTION

4. (SBU) The somewhat portly, wild-haired 59-year old Grillo has established himself over the past decade as an unofficial commentator on Italian corruption, most notably identifying accounting problems with Italian conglomerate Parmalat, long before the full details of its financial irregularities were revealed. According to Grillo, endemic corruption in Italy's current political class has destroyed any hope of Italy improving its economic prospects. The only solution, in his view, is removing virtually all politicians left and right and replacing them with young people who have fewer personal ties to the current establishment and who have less of a vested interest in the status quo.

5. (SBU) Grillo described corruption as standard operating procedure in current Italian political culture. In his eyes, powerful politicians on both the right and left aim only to maintain power. They are too old, out of touch and lack the vision, ability, and interest to improve conditions in Italy. According to Grillo, this desire to hold onto power explains all: the manipulation of administrative procedures, the collusion between businessmen and politicians, and the suborning of the mainstream media to obscure illegal acts. Thus, power brokers never seem to leave office, even when indicted or convicted. Indeed a favorite theme is his focus on the 24 (by his count) indicted or convicted parliamentarians still holding their seats.

GETTING WORSE

6. (SBU) Grillo believes that the corrupt practices of

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today's politicians have become more sophisticated since anti-corruption investigations in the early 90s--the so-called "Clean Hands" or Mani Pulite efforts. A major change, in his view, is that bribes and kickbacks are now more blatant and represent a larger share of public contracts.

7. (SBU) Grillo lamented the ineffectiveness of dedicated government agencies, citizens groups, and NGOs--including Transparency International--to combat corruption in Italy. To him, they are either too small, too local, and/or too single-issue focused to be able to work with similar organizations to create an effective anti-corruption front. Reacting to our observation that the Corte dei Conti's recent scathing report on corruption (ref) in Italy drew very little response: Grillo said that the Italian public is in a "medical coma."

8. (SBU) In addition to the current waste removal situation in Naples, Grillo tagged the energy, banking, and health care sectors as particularly corrupt. He saw each as prone to some combination of (illegal) non-competitive, cooperation between corporate entities, falsification of accounts, and/or awarding positions and contracts based on anything but merit.

SWEEPING SOLUTIONS

9. (SBU) The cornerstone of Grillo's message is that virtually all Italian politicians and political parties are illegitimate. Their previous convictions, current investigations, or blatant conflicts of interest render them unable and ineligible to govern with legitimacy. Further, he sees no difference between policy platforms of the center right and center left. His answer is a boycott of the electoral system. On his blog he urges Italians not to vote in the upcoming elections that he considers "illegal" and "unconstitutional," in the sense that this election is being held before a widely recognized need for reform of the Italian electoral law was enacted. His boycott is one of the reasons (though not a main one) why pollsters predict a low voter turnout in the upcoming Italian national elections on April 13-14.

10. (SBU) Grillo is particularly critical of the current "party list" system. He holds that removing voters' opportunity to choose individual candidates perpetuates

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political business as usual. In what may be the germ of a future political party, he is allowing independent candidates in municipal (local) elections to use his name. He is publicizing these names on his blog. To qualify for his unofficial support, these individuals must adhere to three basic principles: 1) they must not have held office before; 2) they must not have criminal records; and 3) they must agree that, once elected, they will post all transactions and activities related to their offices clearly on the internet.

THE INTERNET

11. (SBU) Grillo is a great proponent of the internet. His blog has given him tremendous national and international exposure. In addition, he sees the internet as a great tool in promoting transparency in government. During our discussion, he observed that the internet has helped citizens to track local government spending and performance. He also claimed that he builds his following for his public rallies solely via the internet.

12. (SBU) Grillo claimed that mainstream media and communication companies consciously have not promoted the development of the new media, and fear its competition. Interestingly, he claimed that mainstream political parties have not yet seen the internet as a tool and hence are not making a big effort to invest in the infrastructure.

LUDDITE, PROGRESSIVE, OR BOTH?

13. (SBU) In addition to supporting an election boycott, Grillo opposes the development of nuclear power, construction of regassification plants, and the building of incinerators in Italy. These positions are justified by his observation that any one of these projects would see an enormous loss of public funds to corruption, the mafia, or both. Moreover, his opposition to construction of incinerators, something for which Naples and Campania have urgent need, is grounded in his well-founded fear that Campania refuse is laced with industrial contaminants of all sorts, much of it trucked in from northern Italy. Hence, incinerators, in Grillo's view, would only serve to inject thousands of tons of dangerous particulates into the atmosphere.

COMMENT

14. (SBU) Well-informed, tech savvy, provocative, yet entertaining, Grillo is unique, almost a lone voice in Italian public discourse. His outspoken opposition to the political status quo has earned him exclusion from standard media fora. Once an oft-featured television host and personality, neither public, nor private Italian television now mention or feature him. In our meeting, he claimed that various night clubs and business conventions that once hired him to perform no longer do so out of fear of political ostracism. Our institutional contacts almost instinctively discount the validity of his message.

15. (SBU) Yet he commands appeal. He reliably put hundreds of thousands in the piazzas for his trademark "Vaffa . . . Day"--gently translated as "up yours" day. Students, the less well-off, and those we might see as the "disenfranchised"--i.e., those ignored or condescended to by the system--are the core of his fans. Yet those of quite different social backgrounds--some banker contacts for example--profess fascination. In another manifestation of his popular appeal and potential electoral power, civil courts in Rome recently banned several independent candidates who had improperly incorporated Grillo's name into their election symbols and slogans. Apparently some candidates were seeking Beppe Grillo's "seal of approval."

16. (SBU) Some of Grillo's ideas are utopian and unrealistic. But in spite of his incoherent political philosophy, his perspective gives voice to a section of public opinion that does not find expression elsewhere. His unique blend of confrontational humor, backed up with just enough statistics and research, make him a credible extramural interlocutor on the Italian political system. END COMMENT.
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