

Protest unnerves Italy's political elite

Campaign uses irreverence and humor to demand reform

By Elisabetta Povoledo

MILAN: The success of a grassroots antipolitics campaign spearheaded by an iconoclastic comedian is giving Italian politicians pause for thought.

Beppe Grillo is the man behind V-Day (the V stands for a very rude Italian expletive), which attracted 300,000 people on Saturday to sign a petition supporting a common goal: purging Italy of its corrupt political class, which in Grillo's view includes political parties, most government institutions and the media.

Some politicians dismissed Grillo's initiative as "shallow demagoguery" and warned of "populist tendencies."

"Mass protests aren't always right," Antonio Polito, a center-left senator, said Wednesday. "The history of the last century is full of mass protests that were wrong. When democracy was lost, it was lost thanks to mass protests."

Others cautioned of warning bells that should be heeded.

"In the face of mass criticism, those who are criticized should listen and try to understand," Fausto Bertinotti, the left-wing speaker of the lower house of Parliament said on a talk show late Tuesday night. "Grillo is filling a void that exists in politics with some very dubious material, but his criticism should be accepted."

Italians lined up in more than 200 cities and towns to sign the petition for

Grillo's "Clean Up Parliament" proposal that, if it were brought before Parliament and adopted, would ban candidates convicted of crimes from seeking public office, limit politicians to two terms and introduce the direct election of legislators.

"I was really surprised. I didn't expect such a big turn out," Grillo said in a telephone interview Tuesday. Organizers estimated that 50,000 people turned out at a rally to hear the comic rail against the political class in Bologna on Saturday. "What happened out there was the release of a virus that's about to attack the political class. But in this case there's no vaccine."

In many ways, V-day was one more example of a growing dissatisfaction among Italians with the state of politics. With more than 750,000 copies sold, a summer best seller has been Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella's "The Caste: How Italian Politicians Became Untouchable," a biting exposé of greed, waste and corruption.

"People feel that basic requests, like greater efficiency, widespread reforms, or the modernization of institutions and the economy are being ignored by the current class," said Roberto D'Alimonte, who teaches political science at the University of Florence, noting that statistics and polls all pointed to general dissatisfaction. "Then, too, they see the current crop of politicians as costly, privileged and arrogant."

Grillo's protest began through his blog, www.beppegrillo.it, now one of the top five most read Web sites in Italy with more than a million hits in July, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

The blog has spawned hundreds of grassroots groups — called "meet ups" — that organized stands in cities around Italy and abroad to collect signatures Saturday.

"The idea of V-day was to give a voice to those who don't have a voice," said Grillo, who has denied plans to start his own political party. His supporters, he noted, are already "a political movement" and meet regularly to discuss issues like the economy and the environment and try to raise awareness on those questions.

"Because the movement starts on the Web, it starts from below," he said. This was, he said, a blueprint for the future. "We need new blood, new words."

In the long run, the V-day campaign could further weaken Prime Minister Romano Prodi's center-left government, which has been struggling to implement many of its campaign promises. In a poll published by the Milan daily *Corriere della Sera* this week, 68 percent of respondents said that they were not satisfied with the government during its first 16 months in power.

Renato Mannheimer, whose polling company Metis conducted the survey, wrote that the disappointment arose



Pierpaolo Ferreri/AFP

The comedian, blogger and antipolitical campaigner Beppe Grillo has called for a wholesale purge of Italy's establishment.

from the perception that the government was "unable to bring things to a close," citing dozens of examples of "unanswered promises and uncompleted projects."

After the rallies, some of Grillo's critics attacked the comic for his "messianic approach."

"The political class feels threatened and so it's defending itself by trying to delegitimize the protests," D'Alimonte said. "But there's more to it."

Grillo said: "They're calling me a guru, someone who mesmerizes crowds. But that just means that they didn't get what happened on the streets on Saturday."