

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2012

THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



Global Information Society Watch

2012



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Financial support provided by

Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)



Global Information Society Watch

Published by APC and Hivos
2012

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ISSN: 2225-4625
ISBN: 978-92-95096-85-1
APC-201301-CIPP-R-EN-DIGITAL-176

ITALY

POPULAR RESISTANCE TO CORRUPTION IN ITALY



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Introduction

Italy has widespread corruption, estimated at about 60 billion euro by official sources,¹ mostly occurring in the infrastructure sector, public procurement (especially in the health sector), the privatisation of state properties and utilities, licences for public goods and services, and real estate development. Italy is one of the worst performing European Union (EU) countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.² Furthermore, observers often refer to "legal corruption", that is to say, resources and privileges given to political parties as well as to elected officials without any reasonable requirement for minimum accountability. Such a phenomenon is widely considered by the public as "immoral" and as a hidden form of corruption, although formally it is not illegal.³

In this context, over the past three decades all the attempts to eradicate endemic corruption through judiciary actions or popular initiatives have failed. But in recent years the internet seems to have offered a new tool and hope to the popular opposition fighting against corruption – and a unique political and social movement has formed thanks to the potential of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the web.

It all started through the unusual partnership between a science-fiction and internet expert and a popular comedian, resulting in the creation of what became the most popular and influential Italian blog: www.beppegrillo.it. The blog acted firstly as a powerful catalyst for anti-corruption activism

and street rallies, involving hundreds of thousands of participants; and then as a platform for triggering what we could now call an Italian version of the Pirate Party: the Five Star Movement ("Movimento 5 stelle"). This movement has been created around a programme against corruption, and during the latest administrative elections (May 2012) it became the third-largest political entity in the country.

Policy and political background

Historically, the massive corruption since World War II (which could count as having important precedents going back all the way to the unification of Italy in 1861)⁴ was mainly due to two factors:

- The organised crime rooted in several Italian territories (first of all the Mafia in Sicily, but also Camorra, Ndrangheta and Sacra Corona Unita in other regions of southern Italy, and expanding into a white-collar criminality pervading the more industrialised areas of central and northern Italy). Organised crime's network of power contaminated both politics and the public administration, again, against a historical background of continuity between the ruling class and criminality that has no parallel in other European countries.⁵
- The lack of political change due to the four-decade-long rule by a centre-right coalition, opposed to one of the strongest Communist parties in Western European democracies.

In the early 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, a wave of judiciary investigations on widespread corruption, named operation "Clean Hands", swept away the previous political setting. However, this political reshuffle did not bring a real improvement in the fight against corruption⁶ because the political forces that emerged from the change reinstated the same bad governance practices of their predecessors. They also embarked on a series of legal reforms of crimes against public administration that obstructed the work of the judiciary, guaranteeing de facto impunity to perpetrators of corruption,

1 Corte dei Conti (National Auditors Office) (2012) Declaration by Presidente della Corte dei Conti Luigi Giampaolino, 17 February.

2 Italy is ranked 68th out of 183 countries on the index. www.transparency.org

3 *La casta. Così i politici italiani sono diventati intoccabili* (The Caste: How Italian Politicians Became Untouchable) is an Italian book written by Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella, two journalists from the Italian national newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, detailing the amount of graft and corruption in Italian politics. It was published in 2007, and became a bestseller with more than 1.3 million copies sold and 28 reprints. The *International Herald Tribune* described it as a book that "grabs attention by depicting Italian politicians as greedy and self-referential."

4 Garrone, A. G. (1996) *L'Italia corrotta 1895-1996: cento anni di malcostume politico*, Editori Riuniti.

5 See, e.g., Scarpinato, R. with Lodato, S. (2008) *Il ritorno del Principe*, Chiarelettere.

6 Della Porta, D. and Vannucci, A. (1999) *Un paese anormale: come la classe politica ha perso l'occasione di Mani Pulite*, Laterza.

either by decriminalising specific behaviours (e.g. false accounts reporting) or by creating shorter terms under the statute of limitations.

The story of www.beppegrillo.it: How it started

One day in early 2005, two very different personalities met: an internet expert, Gianroberto Casaleggio, and a popular comedian, Beppe Grillo.

Casaleggio was CEO of an ICT-savvy web consultancy that had developed a free-to-view online table mapping Italian conflicts of interests in the finance and private sectors, tracking down cross-sector positions of individuals sitting on the boards of corporations, as well as on the boards of their controlling companies or banks giving them loans. While Grillo was then a very popular comedian, he had been excluded from both the public and commercial television stations since he had, during a popular TV programme, outspokenly and ironically denounced the endemic corruption in politics.⁷ In those days Grillo was touring in theatres with a show denouncing corruption and turbo-capitalism, and also smashing a computer in each performance, portraying it as a tool of globalisation which was detrimental to people's welfare and social justice.

2005: The creation of the blog

Casaleggio met Grillo and offered him a different view on the potential of ICTs for social and behavioural change. Following a reportedly lively discussion, Casaleggio convinced Grillo not only not to publicly smash computers, but even to use ICTs to become a blogger. The blog www.beppegrillo.it was launched in 2005, soon to become a reference for free expression in the claustrophobic Italian media environment dominated by Berlusconi-owned television stations and by RAI – public service television channels under his control – as well as by a print press heavily influenced by major corporate powers. After three years, [beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) was the most popular blog in Italy, with an average of 200,000 thousand unique visitors a day,⁸ and one

of the most influential blogs according to a ranking prepared by *The Guardian*. Nowadays, the blog has more than 620,000 followers on Twitter, and is topping the global social media charts (920,000 “Likes” on Facebook) in addition to 95 million downloads on YouTube.⁹

2007: Activism moves from the blog to the streets

Until 2007, Grillo continued to perform in commercial theatres, and to maintain the blog as a side activity and on a voluntary basis. In September 2007, he decided to try mobilising his web followers, and through his blog they organised a rally in Italy's main towns, called “V-Day”,¹⁰ with the “V” standing for vendetta, vengeance and “vaffanculo” (Italian for “fuck off”). During the rally, Grillo took to the stage in Bologna and projected the names of two dozen Italian politicians elected in the parliament who had been convicted of crimes ranging from corruption to tax evasion and perjury. It was estimated that more than one million Italians participated in this rally.

Looking out over the crowd in Bologna, Grillo said, “We are part of a new Woodstock. Only this time the drug addicts and sons of bitches are on the other side!” Grillo also used this rally to urge Italians to sign a petition calling for the introduction of a popular initiative bill for a “Clean Parliament” and to remove members of the Italian Parliament who have criminal convictions of any kind from office. He concluded by observing, “We’ve managed to do something that will make history.” And he may be right, since that was probably the largest popular rally organised using the internet in Italy. It was followed by a couple of other national rallies not organised by Grillo's movement, but organised using the internet and attracting a similar level of participation. One of these was promoted by “Popolo Viola” (Purple People) on 5 November 2009 to protest against Berlusconi's control over the Italian media. Several other smaller local events were organised using the “Meetup” online social networking portal that facilitates offline group meetings in various localities around the world. As part of this trend of activism using the internet, hackers have also produced online tools to support anonymous whistleblowing in the fight against corruption and tax evasion.

7 In 1987, during the Saturday night TV show *Fantastico 7*, Grillo attacked the Italian Socialist Party and its leader Bettino Craxi, then Italy's prime minister, on the occasion of his visit to the People's Republic of China. Grillo cracked, “If the Chinese are all socialists, who do they steal from?” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beppe_Grillo

8 But these figures are very arguable, because no official measurement of blogs is currently made in Italy. According to www.beppegrillo.com the blog has more than 5.2 million visitors per month, 80 million visitors on its YouTube channel (second in Italy after RAI in the category of News and Politics), 575,000 subscribers on its page on Facebook, 80,000 followers on Twitter, and 500,000 subscribers on the mailing list for its daily newsletter (according to a post published on 13 April at 14:58). The last available data provided by Technorati in 2008 estimated 7.5 million unique visitors per month (250,000 per day).

9 Source: Osservatorio Fullsix, May-June 2012, published on Panorama, 1 August, p. 23.

10 For an analysis of the media coverage of the event, see Pepe, A. and Di Gennaro, C. (2009) Political protest Italian-style: the blogosphere and mainstream media in the promotion and coverage of Beppe Grillo's V-day, *First Monday*, 6 December. firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2740/2406

2010: *The foundation of a movement*

In 2010, Grillo and his online and offline followers decided to scale up their social and political engagement, and started the Five Star Movement. Grillo said, “The spirit of the Five Star Movement can be summarised in two words: transparency and participation, both possible thanks to the diffusion of the internet.” The five stars represent the five basic points of the shared programme developed through online consultation: water, environment, transport, connectivity and growth. Grillo has stated on several occasions that he has no desire to be a leader and to be elected, but only to join, using the internet, people who believe in ideals like honesty and direct democracy.

2011-12: *Electoral success for the Movement*

In 2011, the first candidates for the Five Star Movement ran for office in local elections, chosen using participatory online mechanisms. And the Movement gained the first 30 elected positions in municipal, provincial and regional governing bodies with a percentage at the national level averaging 4% of the vote. Newly elected officials from the Movement piloted a number of online transparency mechanisms, such as sharing administrative working documents on the web, or webstreaming their activities in local elected councils. In May 2012, 101 of the 941 cities in Italy had candidates from the Movement.

Grillo said that the main purpose of the Movement’s commitment to participation was to “take away money from politics.” And he repeatedly said that with no financial gain, “politics becomes about passion.” In the 2012 local elections, the Movement achieved an electoral high point, with a national average of 10% of the vote – with peaks of up to 60% in some cities, including the election of the mayor in Parma, a provincial capital. During the writing of this report (mid-July 2012), polls predicted a potential result for the Five Star Movement ranging from 10% to 25% in the next parliamentary elections, to take place in Spring 2013 (if not earlier, because of the economic and political crisis).

It is too early to say whether this political success of the Movement will translate into concrete and effective actions to address and successfully tackle the endemic corruption. But at least it is an unprecedented attempt to change established bad practices, an attempt which has been catalysed through the web.

Conclusions

The Five Star Movement is regarded by some foreign observers as an Italian version of the Pirate Party that exists in some northern EU countries

(even if there is now a much smaller political group defining itself as the Italian Pirate Party). In reality the Five Star Movement has some peculiar features and differences that distinguish it from the European Pirate Parties, such as being formed around a well-known public figure, as well as using the issue of fighting corruption in politics as a catalyst. Grillo referred to the Movement as a kind of “hyper-democracy” that has been enabled by the internet. In a book of essays he co-authored with Casaleggio entitled *Siamo in guerra* (We Are at War), they theorised that “with the web the barrier between the citizens and the institutions can be overcome,” and that ideas count more than money on the internet. The hope is that direct management by citizens in the public sector will replace the mechanisms of delegating to elected officials, which has fostered decades of widespread practices of corruption. Casaleggio, a science fiction expert, theorised that there is a sort of war between the “old world” and the new connected world, and the latter will ultimately prevail, with a public administration managed through a collective intelligence enabled by the web, which would be able to minimise corruption and misgovernance.

Action steps

The popularity of an individual artist combined with the social networking power of the internet can be critical assets for aggregating a popular anti-corruption movement. In this case the success also depended on the blog’s content, which needs to have a groundbreaking quality that meets the expectations of its readers so that it functions as an effective vehicle for collective action, while it is up to the “followers” to self-organise effectively to create concrete political actions and proposals for achieving change.

The artist – or any campaign leader – and the supporters should be ready to be scrutinised in their personal life, including their earnings, properties and private relationships. The popular figure acting as a catalyst and the movement’s elected official will have to reiterate publicly numerous times that they have no personal interest in the cause, stand to make no personal economical gain, and have no ambition to destabilise democracy, but that their motivation is just to want to honestly improve things, in the framework of the democratic setting.

Activists should be prepared to be attacked by those who are part of the “old” corrupted system and do not want change. The enemies of transparency and the law will attack the personalities to delegitimise the movement, and they will promote alleged conflicts of interest. Any movement’s members will

be accused of a lack of expertise and knowledge to undermine their claims, as well as of having hidden agendas and being guided or influenced by others.

Activists should be ready to tackle these allegations, again using the transparency enabled by the internet, which should also be used to create expertise-based, participatory and meritocratic selection mechanisms for their representatives and elected officials.

Finally, the movement will have to deal with the precise role – and powers – of the leader of the movement. In the case discussed above, Grillo in

some cases appeared to have the last say in important decisions and is also the owner of the official trademark of the movement. The precise role and power of Casaleggio is also increasingly under scrutiny within the movement. In other words, this movement born from the web and now transformed into a political force is suffering from the typical problems of any strong and ethical civil society-based movement when it enters into the political arena: it finds it difficult to mediate the various conflicting interests that characterise the politics of modern and complex societies. ■