

In Italy, crime pays and may get you elected

di Tracy Wilkinson

When they vote this weekend, Italians can choose among any number of convicted felons or the odd TV go-go dancer on the ballot. Not to mention the personal friends, relatives and, in one case, the physical therapist of party leaders putting together potential governments. Crime does not disqualify you from running for office in this country, nor are qualifications necessarily necessary. Campaign season for the election of Italy's 62nd government in 63 years has highlighted the long line of unresolved problems undermining the country, thwarting important change and stymieing what was once a fabled icon of culture.

A beautiful, romantic country of olive-dappled landscapes and cobblestoned piazzas famed for its food, fashion and *bella figura*, Italy is today a land awash in corruption, economic decay, political ennui, rampant impunity and a fast-declining standard of living. Inflation is among the highest in Western Europe, growth the lowest. Record numbers of people report feeling poorer than ever.

The conduct of business is a murky and frustrating experience -- unless you're the Mafia, now the largest business in Italy, accounting for 7% of gross domestic product, according to the Assn. of Italian Industrialists.

The judiciary rarely functions: Cases can languish not for years but decades. Italian Parliament members are the highest-paid in Europe but, in the opinion of many people, the least effective, a self-perpetuating elite that seems hellbent on taking the country down with it.

"With its byzantine and decadent style of politics, Italy is at a point of no return," says sociologist Luca Ricolfi, author of a scathing critique titled "The Art of Non-Government."

Lack of accountability trumps civic duty every time. And don't expect national elections taking place today and Monday to change things.

The man leading the polls is Silvio Berlusconi, a flamboyant billionaire tycoon who, at 71, would be prime minister for the third time. Although he brought a measure of stability, he is widely accused of ruling to enrich himself, his media empire and his cronies.

Berlusconi heads a slate that includes his physiotherapist and an unrepentant Fascist, as well as several center-right women who Berlusconi said last week were "surely prettier" than leftist women. Among them is one of the voluptuous dancers normally featured in skimpy clothing on his television networks.

His main opponent is Walter Veltroni, a popular mayor of Rome and former communist who has tried to recast himself as an agent for change, despite his decades in politics. He heads a loose coalition of Italy's famously fractured left and center-left parties.

Enthusiasm among voters is achingly low. TV ratings for recent interviews with Berlusconi and Veltroni were crushed by a rerun of an Italian detective movie.

Italians have watched one government disaster follow another: from the desperate, botched attempt to sell the national airline; to a Mafia-fueled crisis of mounting, uncollected trash that has engulfed the south and spoiled the region's supply of cherished mozzarella; to the premature

toppling of the outgoing government by a single politician peeved over his wife's arrest on corruption charges.

Italians do get angry about the circumstances, but the anger does not routinely lead to change. There are many reasons, including the weight given regional loyalties over national conscience; the inordinate trust in family but in nothing else, least of all authority; the palliative role of the still-dominant Roman Catholic Church. And for all the grumbling, Italians, until recently, have lived fairly comfortably.

So instead the response is one of resignation, apathy and impotence: Italian voters feel they have no real choice and the government will not benefit them, and that in turn drives them further away from an activist role in democracy. A rotten ruling class with a vested interest in the status quo blocks any real reform.

"This is a system that is preying on Italians, sucking the best energies of the country, preventing a meritocracy from developing and forcing everyone to play a game," said Alexander Stille, an academic who specializes in Italy. "Italy has always been a place where people felt that . . . unless you cheat or break the rules, the deck is stacked against you."

Last year, a book for the first time put letter and verse to long-held suspicions of official corruption. "La Casta [The Caste: How Italian Politicians Became Untouchable]" became a bestseller and triggered a debate that gripped the nation for months. The term *la casta* became part of the national lexicon and is now used universally to describe a slothful, overindulged political elite.

Among the book's infuriating revelations:

- * Italian Parliament members last year had the highest salaries in Europe (more than 50% higher than their British, German and French counterparts).

- * It costs more to run the Italian Parliament than any other in Europe -- 10 times as much as Spain's. In the last legislature, 16 lawmakers were convicted felons (and continued in office), and 10 or so others were facing criminal charges.

"It is impossible to change the situation as long as the people are the same," said Sergio Rizzo, a journalist and coauthor of "La Casta" with colleague Gian Antonio Stella. Harnessing the discontent, irreverent comic Beppe Grillo staged huge rallies across the country, collecting hundreds of thousands of signatures of people demanding term limits for legislators and a ban on felons running for office. He sidestepped traditional broadcast and print media (which he believes are controlled by special interests) and used the Internet and word of mouth to appeal particularly to youth. Today Grillo marshals a veritable movement, which is also fielding regional candidates.

Italians have tolerated their rancid political system, he said, because they are essentially sleepwalking.

"We make laws about the economy, but there is no economy," he said. "We make laws about labor, and there is no work. We have a constitution that no one knows. We are a country that does not behave like a nation."

A gregarious 59-year-old with a head of unruly silver curls, Grillo stands in sharp contrast to most of Italy's politicians, who wear designer suits and perfect makeup. Informally banned from television because of his take-no-prisoners style, Grillo launched a campaign urging the European Union to stop sending public works money to Italy, which he contended the government stole or squandered. Later, he invited Germany to invade Italy to save it.

For a moment, there was a glimmer of hope that public anger would coalesce into something more catalytic.

But then early this year the government of Prime Minister Romano Prodi collapsed in a pique of petty politics, 20 months into a five-year term and before a law could be passed that would have reformed the electoral system. Without changes to the highly flawed system, most analysts agree, the country is doomed to another round of unaccountable political leaders dedicated to squabbling over power while stifling creative reform.

Among the flaws, the current electoral system gives disproportionate influence to small parties, some formed by no more than a single guy with a little cash. It was one of those "one-man" parties that brought down the government; an even tinier party, led by a politician named Pizza, nearly derailed this weekend's elections when he raised a stink over use of his party logo.

Italians have lived with their chaotic political system for generations.

The indignation is acute now, however, because many here expected improvements after the Cold War ended and a corruption scandal in the early 1990s shook up the political establishment.

Instead, they got a cavalier Berlusconi, and after him, a plodding Prodi. The realization that the problems go deeper than a particular party or leader finally came home to roost.

"It will take about 10 years to change this political class," said Ricolfi, the sociologist. "But the problem is that in 10 years we will have sunk so far that we won't be able to pull ourselves out again. It will be too late, end of story."