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I'll Take Political Clowns Over Populists Any Day

By Ian Buruma

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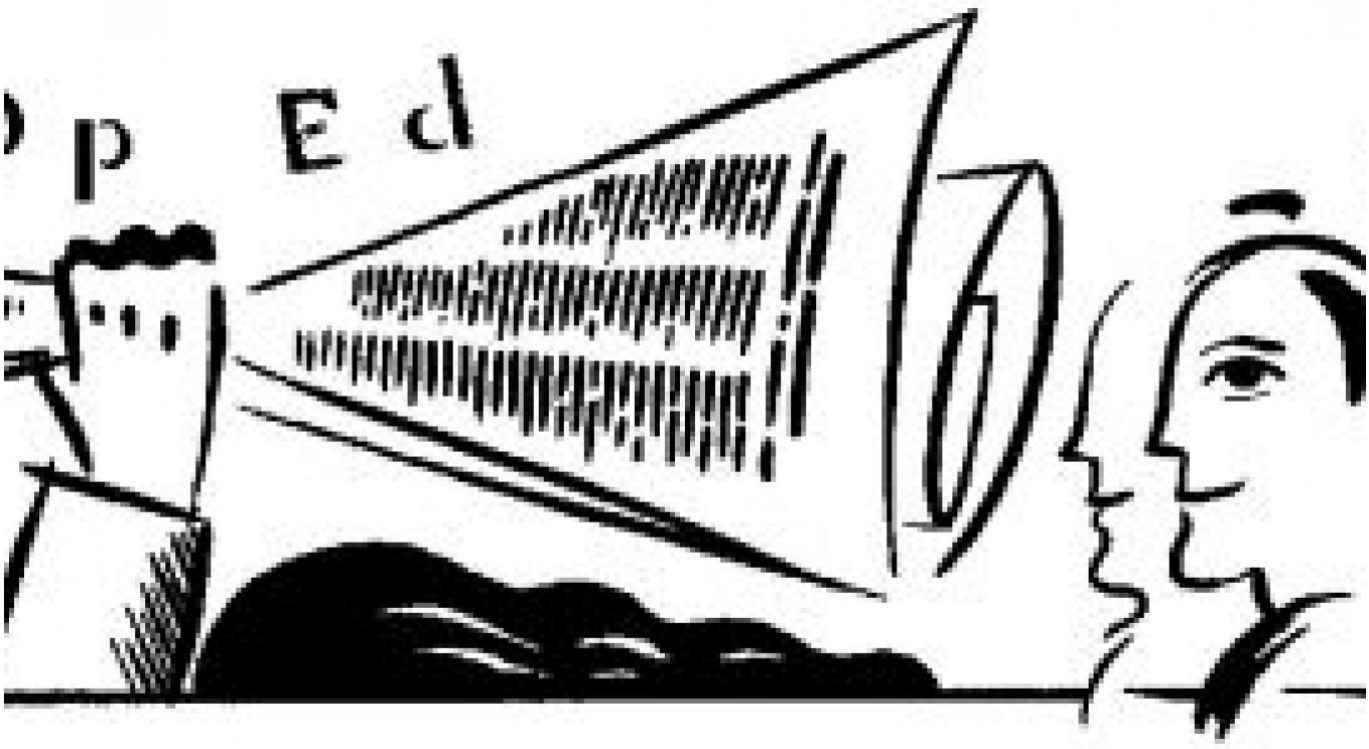

When too many Italians voted late last month for either a louche and discredited business tycoon or a comedian, European stock markets plummeted. With no public trust in the political class, Italy might become ungovernable.

But Italians are not alone. Rage against the political establishment has become a global phenomenon. Chinese bloggers, U.S. tea party activists, British europhobes, Egyptian Islamists, Dutch populists, Greek ultra-rightists and Thai "red shirts" all have one thing in common: hatred of the status quo and contempt for their countries' elites. We are living in an age of populism. The authority of conventional politicians and traditional media is slipping away fast.

Populism can be a necessary corrective when political parties grow sclerotic, mass media become too complacent or too close to power and bureaucracies are unresponsive to popular needs. In a globalized world managed by bankers and technocrats, many people feel that they have no say in public affairs. They feel abandoned.

Our national politicians, increasingly powerless to cope with serious crises, are suspected, often with good reason, of simply looking after their own interests. All we can do is vote the rascals out, sometimes by voting for candidates whom we would not take seriously in more normal times.

Italian elites are not the only ones in need of being shaken up. But the problem with populism is that it is rarely benign. In the 1930s, it resulted in violent movements led by dangerous men in uniform. Today's populists are different. They do not, on the whole, advocate violence. Some preach that Muslims are destroying Western civilization. Others think that U.S. President Barack Obama is a kind of communist out to destroy the United States.

Two types of contemporary populists, however, stand out: the ultra-rich business tycoon and the clown. In the Anglo-Saxon media world, Rupert Murdoch, owner of far too many newspapers, television stations and movie studios, is a typical populist tycoon. But he never aspired to lead a country. Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra did — and still do.

Neither the clown nor the tycoon is well suited to being a democratic leader. The question is which is worse.

Clowns have always played a role in politics. Medieval court jesters were often the only ones who could speak truth to despotic kings. Today, it is often comedians who claim to speak truth to power — and to the public.

In the U.S., liberals turn for political commentary to television comedians like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, who are now more trusted than traditional news broadcasters. And clownish right-wing radio talk-show hosts now have more influence on many conservative U.S. voters than the sober journalists of the mainstream media do.

A few years ago, a clown named Brozo, with a large red nose and a bright green wig, was Mexico's most popular political commentator on television, actively courted by all candidates running for national office. In 1980, the French clown Coluche actually dropped out of the presidential race when one newspaper put his popular support at 16 percent, causing him to fear that he might influence the result too much.

The prototype of modern European populism was the flamboyant Dutch political showman Pim Fortuyn, who was assassinated in 2002 by a fanatical vegan. Fortuyn's outrageousness was deliberately provocative and always entertaining. His rants against the elites were often confused, but he was funny, which made the old elite politicians look like stuffy old bores, which many of them were.

Now Italy has Beppe Grillo, whose success in the country's recent election makes him the first professional comedian to lead a major political party in Europe.

The thing about clowns, though, is that few have any aspirations to rule their countries. Before his death, Fortuyn is said to have been terrified of the prospect of becoming prime minister. Grillo cannot even aspire to the job in Italy because of his criminal record.

Clowns mostly seek to provoke, and this can be healthy. They are less likely than members

of the professional political class to allow political calculations to influence their views. Sometimes, they actually say things that are uncomfortable, but true, and that need to be said.

Political business tycoons, however, have different ambitions. They attack the old elites, but their motive is usually not to shake things up but to take their power. Promising to spread the riches that they have made for themselves, they exploit the fantasies of those of us who have little and want more. Berlusconi understood the dreams of many Italians very well. His extravagance, clownishness and even his girls were part of his popular appeal.

In Thailand, the self-made, ethnic-Chinese media billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra was especially admired by the rural poor. Like a beneficent king, he would give them money and promised to challenge the old elites in Bangkok — the bankers, generals, judges and even the courtiers surrounding the Thai king.

But tycoons are not natural democrats. Their main interest is in their own business. What's more, they do not hesitate to undermine an independent press or judiciary when their business interests are threatened. Even though his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, is now in power, Thaksin is still trying to evade trial in Thai courts on a wide array of financial charges.

As it happens, Thaksin was overthrown in 2006 by a military coup that was largely backed by the Bangkok elites. Berlusconi was replaced by a government run by elite technocrats, whose policies had to be approved by European bankers and European Union bureaucrats.

Neither of these responses to populism is likely to boost democracy. On the contrary, they make things worse. What is needed is mainstream politicians who understand and respond to what is fueling popular rage. Paying attention to some of what the clowns are saying might be a good first step.

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