

Following leak of prime minister's remarks

Hungary erupts in violent protests

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A cynical speech by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany has led to a wave of mass demonstrations and violent protests in Hungary over the past few days.

The speech was given on May 26 at a closed parliamentary sitting of the Hungarian "Socialist Party" (MSZP), but only made public last Sunday after the text had been leaked to Hungarian radio. Gyurcsany acknowledged the authenticity of the tape and then placed the text of his speech on his own web site. The taped speech shows the level of contempt and arrogance on the part of Gyurcsany and his government with regard to the population.

The prime minister had delivered his controversial speech shortly after the parliamentary elections of April 23. His aim was to pledge his party, which is the successor organisation of the former Stalinist ruling party, to the austerity package that was adopted two weeks later. Gyurcsany frankly admits in the speech that he had deliberately deceived the electorate and postponed what he regarded as necessary economic measures in order to win the election.

"Evidently, we lied throughout the last year and a half, two years. It was totally clear that what we are saying is not true," he told his party colleagues. "You cannot quote any significant government measure we can be proud of, other than at the end we managed to bring the government back from the brink. Nothing. If we have to give account to the country about what we did for four years, then what do we say?"

"We lied in the morning; we lied in the evening," he said.

Gyurcsany left absolutely no doubt that his savings package was deeply unpopular and could cost the party huge numbers of votes. But he told his parliamentary colleagues that they should pay as little attention to the opinion of voters as they did to yesterday's election promises.

"The first few years will be terrible," he said. "It is completely irrelevant that only 20 percent of the population will vote for us.... What would happen if instead of losing our popularity because of bullshitting amongst ourselves we lost it because we promoted great social causes? In that case it is not a problem if we lose the support of society for a

while."

Gyurcsany underlined his provocative statements with the type of crude vulgarity that characterises hardened political circles in Hungary.

The news of Gyurcsany's speech led to the most violent protests in Hungary since the end of Stalinist rule in 1989. Protests took place in a number of cities on Monday night in which several thousands took part.

The situation escalated when about 2,000 opponents of the government stormed the headquarters of the national television station in Budapest, forcing the station to stop transmitting for a short period. Many cars and shops in the city centre were set on fire and police used water cannon and tear gas against demonstrators. Around 100 policemen and 50 protesters were hurt and dozens arrested.

The arsonists and troublemakers constitute, however, only a small minority of those demonstrating. On Tuesday, tens of thousands took to the streets to display their anger at the speech. In the capital's Kossuth Square, approximately 10,000 protested in front of the Hungarian parliament, demanding the prime minister's resignation. Street battles then developed overnight between police and rioters, who tried to gain access to the party headquarters of the MSZP.

It is above all politically right-wing and extreme-right forces that are trying to exploit the popular anger over the prime minister's actions.

Victor Orban, the leader of the main opposition party Fidesz, plans a large demonstration for Saturday. Following its loss of power to the "Socialists" in 2002, this right-wing conservative party has moved even further to the right, and has sought support from amongst avowed fascist circles. In its programme, Fidesz evokes the spirit of the Great Hungarian chauvinism of the former Horthy dictatorship, which it enhances with social demagoguery. One of the speakers at the Budapest demonstration on Tuesday was György Ekrem Kemal, a well-known neo-Nazi and head of the federation named "Those persecuted by communism."

Neo-Nazis and hooligans were also largely responsible for the violent excesses of the past days. Similar elements have

made their presence felt week after week at Hungarian football stadiums. Their latest activities found some support from right-wing parties. The spokesman for Fidesz, Peter Szijjarto, expressed his “solidarity” with the rioters on Monday night.

Despite the intervention by such right-wing forces, the primary driving force of the protests against the government is of a social character. Many of those participating in the demonstrations told the media they had come to express their opposition to drastic economic cuts. The austerity package decided upon immediately after Gyurcsany’s speech has had wide-ranging repercussions for broad masses of the population. Radical economic measures are being implemented with the intention of reducing the country’s budgetary deficit from 10 percent to 3 percent by 2008 as a prerequisite for the introduction of the euro in Hungary in 2010. Such measures are only possible through a drastic reduction in living standards for broad layers of society, who are already impoverished.

The savings package includes tax increases and, in particular, an increase in value-added tax, which disproportionately affects those on small and middle-sized incomes. Existing measures for the reduction of subsidies on electricity and gas have already led to a 30 percent price rise, and the current prices for public transport have risen so steeply that many Hungarians can no longer afford daily bus travel to their place of work.

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Cuts in personnel in public service have had catastrophic consequences for many public schools, and the planned introduction of study fees will lead to an income-based system where only the children of well-off families will receive an adequate education. The government also plans massive cuts to the country’s health system. Gyurcsany endorses the introduction of a general fee for visits to the doctor, as well as increases in patient fees for hospital treatment and medicines.

The fact that popular anger and indignation against these attacks has up until now lacked any progressive outlet is bound up with the crimes of Stalinism and its successor organisations. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian uprising and its brutal suppression by Soviet tanks. Since this event, the much-abused term “communism” has been regarded by many in Hungary as synonymous with the bloody suppression of a popular uprising.

The situation is made even worse when those organisations that emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy then describe themselves as “socialist.” Gyurcsany is a typical representative of such forces, who at the time of the collapse of the Stalinist system shamelessly looted public property,

enriched themselves and now exclusively regard themselves as defenders of the interests of the major enterprises and the rich. Under conditions in which poverty and unemployment spread rapidly, Gyurcsany established the basis for his own fortune through the so-called “wild privatisations” of state property carried out at the beginning of the 1990s.

The former chairman of the communist youth federation, Gyurcsany is now one of the hundred richest individuals in the country. Former Stalinist functionaries sit alongside representatives of the business elite in his government. Nine ministers come from the Socialist Party and three from the Liberal Party (SZDSZ).

The finance minister is Jozsef Veres, a former leading Stalinist functionary, who played a leading role in the transformation of the Hungarian Socialist Party into a social democratic, pro-business party. In the 1990s, Veres was jointly responsible for the Bokros package, the first step towards neo-liberal “reforms” in the country that won the support of international financial markets. Like Gyurcsany, he was “active in business” in the 1990s and accumulated a considerable fortune.

The economics minister is the free-market advocate Janos Koka, former director of an Internet company. His enthusiasm for radical economic reforms made him Gyurcsany’s first choice for the post.

As is the case in Poland and many other eastern European countries, official political life in Hungary is dominated by a small clique, excluding any possibility for the articulation of the interests of the population. Former Stalinists, who have acquired fortunes overnight, engage in bitter battles with former oppositionists such as Victor Orban in Hungary or the Kasczynski brothers in Poland, whose virulent anticommunism has driven them to the extreme right of the political spectrum. Such conflicts are solely devoted to the distribution of economic advantage and political influence, with the social needs of the population only of interest when it comes to election campaigns.

The openness with which Gyurcsany has expressed his contempt for his own voters may be unusual; but such contempt is a commonplace for many other contemporary politicians—and not just in Hungary. Compared with the lies told to justify the Iraq war by his role model, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Gyurcsany is still an amateur.



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