

Hungary: Right-wing Fidesz wins two-thirds majority

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The right-wing conservative Fidesz (Federation of Young Democrats) led by Victor Orban won a more than two-thirds majority in the second round of the Hungarian parliamentary election. Fidesz gained 263 in the 386-seat parliament while the outgoing Socialists (MSZP) won just 59. The neo-fascist Jobbik party won 47 mandates, and the newly founded Green LMP, 16.

According to the Hungarian electoral system, the second round of elections were held in the 57 districts that had failed to elect a candidate with an absolute majority in the first round.

In the first round, on April 11, Orban had already secured an absolute majority with 53 percent of the vote. He therefore has enough support to form the new government replacing the MSZP, which had implemented radical welfare cuts during its eight years in office under the successive heads of government, Péter Medgyessy, Ferenc Gyurcsany and Gordon Bajnai. The MSZP was punished by voters for its policies, gaining scarcely 20 percent compared to its 46 percent tally four years ago.

The elections took place against the background of the international financial and economic crisis, which has had a dramatic effect on Hungary. At the beginning of the 1990s, Hungary was looked upon by many commentators as an eastern European role model. Now, it is struggling with high unemployment and immense debts. The country only avoided bankruptcy last year through the intervention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with a massive loan.

In return for the IMF loan, the MSZP government led by Gordon Bajnai imposed a drastic savings programme, including radical cuts in the social sphere, huge cuts in state subsidies and an increase in value-added tax from 20 to 25 percent. Public service salaries were frozen, supplementary payments abolished,

pensions cut, the retirement age increased from 62 to 65, sick pay reduced by 10 percent, child benefits slashed and subsidies for housing and gas abolished.

The electoral success of Fidesz is not based on a broad base of support in the population. The voter participation rate was just 44 percent for the second round last Sunday—i.e., much less than half of the electorate. The result represented, above all, widespread rejection of the MSZP.

The designated head of government, Orban had entered the election campaign without a proper political programme and after his election victory refrained from proposing any concrete political measures. Instead, he spoke in generalities about the need to fight corruption, increase the country's competitiveness and slim down the official bureaucracy.

Political commentators, however, are united on the course that must be taken by the conservatives. The most important priority of the new government will be drawing up the budget for the current year and reducing the country's burgeoning debt. According to the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (WIIW), this goal, agreed with the IMF, cannot be achieved without further, short-term spending cuts.

The ailing Hungarian railway, as well as many hospitals and municipalities, already relies on state subsidies to deal with deficits resulting from the abolition of the country's former wealth tax by the Supreme Constitutional Court. But in order to reach its budget aims, the new government will invariably be forced to begin its term in office with new spending cuts.

In addition, Fidesz has promised further radical tax reductions and plans further cuts in public services under the pretext "of slimming down the bureaucracy". There can be no doubt that the new government will

continue the austerity policies introduced by the MSZP.

Such policies cannot be implemented without provoking popular opposition, and Fidesz can now seek to utilise its two-thirds majority to change the constitution and attack democratic rights without the agreement of other political parties.

It is in this respect that the vote for the ultra-right-wing Jobbik should be seen. Jobbik has repeatedly sought to turn the weakest layers of Hungarian society into scapegoats allegedly responsible for the country's dire situation, in particular shamelessly picking on Roma and other minorities. The right-wing extremists demand a fight against "gypsy crime" and call for the cutting of social security benefits for Hungary's oppressed Roma minority.

At the same time, Jobbik appeals to the fears of those who are victims of the savings and cuts programmes. In its election programme "Radical Change 2010," the organisation promises to put an end to corruption and assist Hungarian families and stresses the necessity for a nationalist and disciplined outlook in the spheres of educational policy and religious education. Jobbik seeks to appeal to Hungarian farmers and small businessmen with a "buy Hungarian" campaign aimed against European competitors. Jobbik questions Hungary's continued membership in the EU and rejects the Lisbon Treaty.

Jobbik Chairman Gábor Vona has announced that at the opening of the new national assembly in May, he intends to wear the uniform of the banned Hungarian Guard. The paramilitary neo-fascist guard had been banned from political life by a court decision in 2009, but the ban was never properly implemented.

On Wednesday of last week, Vona demanded important offices in the new parliament. His party has its sights on the presidency of the committees for national security and foreign policy.

There are conflicts inside Fidesz over how to deal with the neo-fascists who originally developed in and around Fidesz. Broad sections of the party have spoken out in favour of integrating Jobbik, and the two organisations have been working closely together for some time at a local level. A number of high-ranking Fidesz representatives had attended the founding of the Hungarian Guard. Others, including Orban, have their doubts about cooperating too closely with Jobbik. This lobby in Fidesz would prefer to exploit its large

majority in parliament, which makes it independent of other parties.

The reaction of European political circles to the victory of Fidesz has been largely favourable. They expect Orban to push ahead with harsh austerity policies. However, problems could emerge in the sphere of foreign policy with commentators fearing that Orban could activate the country's so-called Status Law. The controversial law had been introduced by Orban during his first period in power in 1998-2002 and is aimed at awarding Hungarian nationality to members of Hungarian minorities living in neighbouring countries. This law nearly cost Hungary its accession to the European Union and was struck from the statutes by the Socialist government following pressure from Brussels.



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