

Hungary—Fidesz now in power for over 100 days

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In its first 100 days in office, the Hungarian government headed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has introduced a series of laws and initiatives aimed at building up authoritarian structures in political and social life. These measures have been taken largely in response to the demands of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union for drastic austerity measures.

Orbán's right-wing conservative Citizens Federation (Fidesz) has a two-thirds majority in parliament enabling it to push through laws and constitutional changes without the consent of other parties. In the event, Fidesz can rely on political support from the neo-fascist Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), which won the third largest share of the vote in the federal elections held in April.

Responsibility for the political swing to the right in the elections rests squarely with the successor party to the former Stalinist state party, the MSZP, which completely discredited itself during two legislative periods with its cynical, anti-working class policies. In the absence of any progressive alternative, Fidesz and Jobbik were able to profit from widespread popular anger with the MSZP.

The Orbán government immediately initiated a radical austerity agenda aimed at satisfying the demands of the IMF and European Union. Already in 2008, the country only avoided bankruptcy due to emergency relief credits. Orbán has sought to mask the class character of his economic measures with the introduction of a symbolic bank tax and the postponement of some proposed reforms. Nevertheless, the government's massive attacks on jobs, wages, pensions, health care and education will inevitably encounter resistance. They cannot be implemented through traditional democratic means.

During the first 100 of the new government, more than 50 laws were passed, and a half dozen proposals made to amend the constitution. All the proposals were made directly by Fidesz parliamentary deputies rather than by the appropriate ministries. This meant that ministries and professional lobbies were unable to determine the law-making process.

The new Hungarian media law represents a substantial attack on the freedom of the press. It has been described by the International Journalists' Federation, as the "strictest set of regulations in the Western world". The law lays down what should be written and reported by all of the country's various forms of media—public and private broadcasting corporations, television, press and even the Internet. The new regulations also introduce the so-called "right to reply", which obliges all media outlets to both correct false statements and also allocate a space or transmission time for critics to respond to what is regarded as the "injury of the honour or the rights of individuals".

For the first time since 1991, the law dispenses with the term "freedom of expression", and in a further step, a constitutional amendment has been initiated that would commit the media to the values of "God, homeland and family".

The leading bodies of the public broadcasting stations have been occupied almost entirely by Fidesz officials or people close to the party. The chairman is appointed to fill his post for at least nine years.

In many other public agencies, ministries and universities, liberal-minded individuals have been removed and replaced by right-wing, reactionary figures. The number of replacements now amounts to several hundred, with professional experience and ability playing no role.

Named to head the Ministry for National Policy and Church Affairs is the leader of the Catholic-fundamentalist Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP)—Zsolt Semjén. He has declared that he wants to govern the country in line with the papal encyclicals of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Interior Ministry is headed by a major entrepreneur, the former chief of police Sándor Pintér, who, following his early retirement, set up a private security company and also took a seat on the board of the country's biggest bank—OTP. Pintér was already interior minister in Orbán's first government (1989-2002) and is renowned for his rigorous implementation of law and order policies.

The country's constitutional court judges also have close links to Fidesz. One of them, István Stumpf, was a minister of state in the first Orbán government. Stumpf has no legal experience, although the law prescribes that such posts be filled only by those with 20 years of appropriate experience or who are professors. The official justification given for his appointment was that Stumpf had acquired sufficient experience in law as a minister.

A further example of the favouritism pursued by the government is the appointment of the new president of the Court of Auditors. Up to now, this office was filled by independent specialists. Now, however, it has been given to a completely unknown Fidesz provincial deputy with no relevant background.

In order to remove non-Fidesz public officials, parliament passed a law shortly after the election that permits the summary dismissal of any public service employee without reason. An auxiliary regulation prescribes an 80-percent taxation of any redundancy payments.

The right-wing orientation of the new government is manifested most visibly on the placards that hang in front of ministries, barracks and public buildings. They declare that “in the election booths the Hungarian nation has carried out a successful revolution” that is recognized by parliament. The elections enabled a “new social contract”; Hungary had agreed a “new system of national unity”, and the government is carrying out its work “resolutely, uncompromisingly and in an unshakeable manner”.

In what amounts to a provocation against neighbouring countries, Hungarians living abroad and

Hungarian minorities in Slovakia, Serbia and Romania are also included in this “system of national unity”.

In light of this nationalist orientation, it comes as no surprise that the ultra-right Jobbik believes Fidesz is on the right path, although, according to Jobbik leader Gábor Vona, Fidesz is not going far enough. Vona has demanded that the government rethink its membership of the EU and undertake further measures to combat alleged “gypsy crime”.

Jobbik is confronted with the problem that Fidesz is taking up its pet themes. The party has been rocked by a number of splits, with some of its members demanding that Jobbik adopt an even more radical rightist line in order to outdo Fidesz.

The extent of the turn to the right by Fidesz was graphically illustrated recently by the honorary citizenship awarded by the town of Orosháza to Gyula Gömbös. The town in the southeast of the country had restored honorary citizenship to the fascist Gömbös, who died in 1936. Gömbös had previously been stripped of honorary citizenship eight years ago by the socialist majority on the town council. The restoration of citizenship for Gömbös took place with the express approval of the Fidesz leadership. General Gömbös had served as a war minister and later as prime minister under the Horthy regime, which had concluded a pact with Hitler's Germany. Gömbös played a leading role in the elaboration of Hungary's anti-Jewish legislation.



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