Far-right party wins Hungarian municipal elections

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Twenty years after the collapse of the Stalinist regime in Hungary, an extreme right-wing party is taking control of the state. In the parliamentary elections in May, the Fidesz party won a two-thirds majority. In the aftermath of municipal elections a week ago, the far-right party won the majority in all the county parliaments and, except for Szeged in southern Hungary, all the major cities and towns.

Fidesz secured 596 of the 649 mayoral and official community leadership posts. Only 49 went to the ex-Stalinists in the social democratic Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). Fidesz received 58 percent of all the votes, 17 percent went to independent candidates, and 11 percent to the Socialists.

For the first time since the transition to capitalism in 1990, a right-wing politician will head the city government in the nation's capital, Budapest. The Fidesz candidate, Istvan Tarlos, won the contest to become mayor with 53.5 percent of the ballot, ahead of his Socialist rival, Csaba Horaváth, with 29.1 percent.

Having obtained 17 percent of the votes in the parliamentary elections, the neo-fascist Movement for a Better Hungary, the Jobbik party, received only 5 percent last week. However, Jobbik beat the Socialists to become the second strongest force in three impoverished districts in the country's northeast. For the first time, a neo-fascist has secured the office of mayor. The party also holds seats in numerous municipal councils and county legislatures.

The Green LMP party polled only 1.3 percent nationwide. Established through the efforts of other European parties, the LMP tried to exploit the decline of the Socialists by proposing various liberal reforms, which it would not and could not implement, particularly with the International Monetary Fund demanding strict austerity policies.

There are two major reasons for Fidesz's election victory. The first is the absence of any political alternative for the working class. The social democrats, even more than their conservative rivals, are identified with the free-market policies, austerity and privatization that have ravaged the conditions of the working class.

In the 2006 elections, MSZP won with 43.2 percent of party list votes, which gave it 190 representatives out of 386 in the parliament. Successive MSZP governments, led by prime ministers Ferenc Gyurcsány and Gordon Bajnai, carried out vicious attacks on the working class at the behest of the IMF and European Union. As the global financial crisis pushed the country to the brink of bankruptcy, MSZP implemented the terms of an IMF-backed loan, sharply raising the value-added tax, slashing social spending, raising the retirement age and eliminating vacation bonuses for public sector workers.

Discredited and hated for implementing these attacks, the social democrats' warnings about the right failed to draw large numbers of workers to the polls. Under these conditions, Fidesz's anti-Roma and anti-Semitic demagogy won a hearing from more backward sections of the population. In the end it was able to win majorities with a voter turnout of only 46.7 percent. Polling in Budapest was particularly low and only 30 to 40 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots in some other cities.

The second factor contributing to its victory is that immediately after becoming prime minister in May, Fidesz leader Viktor Orban set about to implement changes in the state apparatus to increase the power of his party. During his first hundred days, a half a dozen motions were moved to change the constitution and more than 50 new laws were passed.

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The constitutional court, business enterprises close to the state and especially the official media are now subject to the tight control of the governing party. In order to be able to get rid of state employees unwilling to toe the party line, parliament passed a law shortly after the election authorising the summary and unsubstantiated dismissal of public service workers.

Another law subordinated the public media and the Internet to the control of the government. It was sharply reprimanded by the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), which complained that laws like these were "really only known to come from totalitarian regimes, where governments place restrictions on freedom of speech".

By shortening deadlines and raising quorums, Fidesz's law on municipal elections made it impossible for many potential candidates to obtain the necessary number of signatures to qualify for ballot status.

Fidesz uses the fascist Jobbik party—which originated from its ranks—like a kind of police dog, let off the leash from time to time to stir up a racist atmosphere. Jobbik was thus able to produce election commercials featuring hate slogans against the Roma population. The Supreme Court instructed public service broadcasters to transmit a provocative election spot in which Jobbik railed against "gypsy criminality".

Following its debacle in the municipal elections, the disintegration of the social democrats has become evident. Katalin Szili, former president of the parliament, left the MSZP and its parliamentary faction and founded her own party, the Social Union.

In a television interview, Szili criticised the MSZP's poor results, saying that, since their major defeat in the parliamentary elections in April, the social democrats were unable "to analyse the reasons for their electoral decline and break with their neo-liberal views".

In September last year, Szili resigned from her post as parliamentary president after seven years in office in order to work for the "rebuilding of the left" in Hungary. At the time, she had already set up an "Alliance for the Future" with the aim of inaugurating "a turn to the left", which was to lead to the formation of the Social Union. She stressed that she was pressing for the creation of an association in which "modern left-wing thinking would develop into an organising and mobilising force".

Szili is trying to use this political manoeuvre to avoid the demise of the MSZP. In particular, a new political home is to be found for disillusioned MSZP members, many of whom were trade unionists and former Stalinist functionaries. No opposition to the attacks from the Orban government can be expected from these quarters.

Pressure from the EU, the IMF and business associations has been mounting on Orban in the wake of his recent triumph in the municipal elections. After the election victory earlier in the year, he continued the previous government's radical austerity programme that had been dictated by the IMF, but to some extent obscured the nature of his own austerity measures by introducing a tax on the banks and delaying some of his plans for reform.

The Bloomberg news agency now writes, "Investors are counting on the election results enabling Orban to implement the specific economic measures and cuts they were awaiting during the four-month-long conflict with the EU and IMF that so annoyed the financial markets."

Doubtless, Orban will toughen his austerity policies in the coming weeks and months. According to an announcement from the right-wing, government affiliated newspaper *Magyar Nemzet*, Orban intends soon to sack his first minister, György Matolcsy, head of the economics ministry. If he does, Orban will be responding to the criticism of leading businessmen who have often been at odds with Matolcsy. Since coming to office, Matolcsy has been calling for a more gradual implementation of austerity measures because he fears a complete collapse of domestic demand for goods and services.

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