

Authoritarian regime takes shape in Hungary

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Hungary's right-wing government led by Victor Orban has used its 15 months in office to systematically establish an authoritarian regime. It has curtailed the powers of the judiciary, imposed limits on press freedom, purged the media and state apparatus of critical voices and introduced a constitution reminiscent of the dictatorship of Regent Miklos Horthy.

At the same time, it has undertaken broad measures against the social and democratic rights of working people. The regime has introduced compulsory labour for the unemployed, slashed pensions, reduced social spending and laid off thousands of public service employees.

In particular, the Orban government has tightened up its authoritarian measures following the end of the Hungarian presidency of the European Union in June. Initially, some sporadic criticism of Orban's measures was raised inside the European Union; now there is little to be heard. There has also been no protest from the ranks of the European People's Party, which includes alongside members of Orban's Civic Union (Fidesz), the German conservative CDU and CSU, and the French ruling UMP party.

Together with its small coalition partner, the national conservative Christian Democrats, Fidesz has a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian Parliament. Fidesz has used its majority to change the constitution and adopt measures that can only be reversed by a two-thirds majority. Having announced his intention to "reconstruct the whole country" at the beginning of his term, Orban has considerably expanded the powers of his government with such laws.

The Constitutional Court, for example, has suffered an extensive reduction of its powers. The country's highest judges are no longer able to rule on whether new budget, tax and welfare laws are consistent with current law.

In October of last year, the Constitutional Court had

declared invalid a government law requiring recipients of state severance contributions to retroactively repay their payments. Meanwhile, the government has re-enacted the law and now has the power to implement even more drastic austerity measures and tax increases without fear of retribution.

Orban also plans to use the judiciary to act against his political opponents. A Parliamentary Select Committee has announced that Social Democratic predecessor governments are to be taken to court on charges of "political crimes" related to the increase in state debt. The Panel has declared that the law could be changed retroactively if the current law for the punishment of former prime ministers Peter Medgyessy, Ferenc Gyurcsany and Gordon Bajnai of the Socialist Party proves insufficient.

The Orban government has carried out thoroughgoing purges in all major public institutions. The top jobs in government agencies, schools and universities are now filled by members of Fidesz, or their relations. Those critical of the government have been forced out of office or dismissed.

In July, the parliament agreed a law that forces the unemployed to undertake compulsory labour. Those refusing to comply are no longer entitled to any form of benefit.

With its "Hungarian work plan" the government introduced a new round of social attacks. It plans to reduce annual expenditure by €225 million and implement a massive reduction of wage levels. The "pay" for forced labour is based on the social welfare rate of 28,500 forints (€110s) a month—i.e., less than half the monthly minimum wage of 78,000 forints.

The forced labour service is also aimed at closing the gaps left by the drastic job reductions in public service. In recent years, thousands of employees have been dismissed, leading to staff shortages. The forced labourers are to be employed in major state projects,

infrastructure schemes and agriculture. As examples of this “community service”, Hungarian media cited the construction of soccer stadiums, road works, drainage maintenance and the building of dams.

The Public Employment Service is just one of the measures of the Orban government aimed directly against the working class. Orban also plans to reduce the federal deficit to less than two percent by 2014 through changes to the country's pension and social security systems. The cuts to pensions are expected to amount to around €500 million in this year alone.

In general, the social divide in Hungary has intensified in recent months. Since the beginning of the term of Fidesz, the official number of unemployed has risen to 690,000. Of the 20 poorest EU regions, 4 are located in Hungary.

There are growing signs of resistance to the social cuts and job reductions on the part of the Hungarian population. There have been a series of protests against job cuts in public services, leading the government to impose restrictions on the right to strike. Strikes are already banned in economic spheres judged to be of strategic significance for the country.

The media are also being systematically censored by the government and brought into line. Immediately after the end of the Hungarian EU Presidency, 550 state journalists were sacked in Budapest. A further 400 are to be fired this autumn.

Most of those dismissed are critical journalists or those close to the opposition Socialist Party (MSZP). Among them are award-winning journalists and a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner. In addition, the state media has been concentrated into a central newsroom headed by chief political editor Daniel Papp.

Papp has a right-wing background. Until 2004, he was media spokesman for the neo-fascist party Jobbik, after which he worked at the ultra-conservative daily Magyar Hírlap and the extreme right-wing Echo TV. He then went on to serve as the press chief for various local Fidesz politicians. Since the summer of 2010, Papp has worked for the Hungarian Television. Following his blatant manipulation of a report about the French Green, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Papp was appointed head of the Hungarian central media newsroom in April.

The few remaining independent media in Hungary are being bullied and intimidated. Left or liberal

newspapers can barely afford to pay their staff because of the lack of advertising revenue. Private TV and radio stations are also coming under increasing pressure. They are no longer allowed to apply for broadcasting frequencies if they have outstanding debts to the Media Authority—NMHH. These debts can be either be fees or financial penalties. The NMHH can impose fines when it judges editorial content to be harmful to the government.

Compliance on the basis of “balanced reporting” is supervised by the so-called Media Council, which is staffed exclusively by Fidesz officials. Ten years ago, its chairman announced that the supreme goal must be to “win the entire monopoly of opinion in the media.”

The ideological basis for these reactionary measures can be found in the new constitution, which Parliament adopted in April. God, Christianity, king, crown and pride in the thousand years of Hungarian history are all rooted in its legally binding statutes.

The text refers to the “historic” heritage of Hungary. This “historical” heritage clearly refers to the dictatorship of Regent Miklos Horthy from 1920 to 1945. In a speech to the nation, Orban declared that the new constitution would end the period in which “Hungarians were systematically oppressed”.

The silence on the part of other EU states on this development speaks volumes. Back in February, following the adoption of the Media Law, it became clear that the European Union had no problem with Orban’s course. The EU Commission was quite prepared to agree to a few minor changes to the Hungarian media law and related restrictions on press freedom.

This shows that these authoritarian trends are not limited to Hungary. All European governments are in the process of shifting the burden of the international economic crisis onto the broad mass of the population via drastic austerity measures. This cannot be carried out by democratic methods.



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