Hungary on the eve of parliamentary elections

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According to current opinion polls, the right-wing Fidesz Party will secure victory in Sunday's parliamentary elections in Hungary. Prime Minister Viktor Orban will then begin his third term in office. The neo-fascist party Jobbik is expected to emerge in second place.

Orban has been in office since 2010, and he previously headed the government between 1998 and 2002. In the last election four years ago Fidesz finished with 45 percent, well ahead of the Social Democrats (MSZp), with 26 percent, and Jobbik, with 20 percent.

During his eight years in office, Orban has pursued far-right policies and established an authoritarian regime. Important positions in the state apparatus are occupied by political cronies and the independence of the judiciary has all but ceased to exist. The constitution has been amended on several occasions to suit the government. Immediately after his election victory in 2010, Orban effectively abolished press freedom and silenced opposition media outlets.

However, even though the electoral system has been tailored to suit Fidesz, unrest predominates in government circles.

At the end of February, Fidesz suffered a shock election defeat in Hódmezövásárhely, a town of 50,000 that was one of its strongholds. Peter Marki-Zay, the independent candidate, won the mayoral election with 57 percent of the vote, while the Fidesz candidate got just 41 percent. Janos Lazar, Orban's right-hand man and head of the chancellery, is from Hódmezövásárhely and was mayor of the town for many years. Previously, Fidesz had usually won elections there with 60 percent of the vote.

Marki-Zay, a former Fidesz supporter and chair of the local Roman Catholic priests' council, received backing from Jobbik, the Greens, and "left" parties, which gave the election national prominence, coming just six weeks ahead of the parliamentary vote.

The Hódmezövásárhely result unleashed a wave of panic in government circles. They fear that Fidesz will lose the two-thirds majority in parliament that enabled it to change the constitution. The result was a symptom of mounting social and political opposition in a country where unemployment and poverty are rampant, in spite of the low official figures.

Orban's son-in-law is also implicated in a corruption scandal. Hungary is currently 66th on Transparency International's list of the most corrupt countries, behind Montenegro and Romania.

Alongside declining levels of support, Orban also confronts a growing strike movement. Strikes have taken place this year in the public sector and in retail. Strikes and protests have also occurred recently in other Eastern European states, against low wages, poor working conditions, and the precarious social situation.

The relatively low level of unemployment is linked to the use of so-called work programmes, under which the unemployed perform community services for €180 per month. It is impossible for anyone to live on this sum. Hungary has fallen from 20 to 29 in the European Health Consumer Index, a comparison of healthcare systems across the continent. The education system is at the breaking point. Pupil performance in maths and reading has deteriorated sharply, according to the Program for International Student Assessment, which compares education systems around the globe.

Under these conditions, Orban has waged a despicable campaign for the election, targeting refugees and those who assist them. In his address to mark Hungary's national day, Orban played the anti-European Union card and stoked the fear of immigration from Islamic countries. The EU intends "to change the face of the European population," he stated, before predicting, "One day, the West Europeans will wake up in countries no longer their own."

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With the so-called “Stop Soros” law, Orban plans to end the activities of refugee organisations in the country, which will result in a drastic worsening of the already terrible conditions refugees face. For months, the government in Budapest has been waging a campaign against US-based multibillionaire George Soros that contains unmistakable anti-Semitic undertones. The government accuses Soros, a Holocaust survivor who comes originally from Hungary, of deliberately encouraging millions of Muslims to come to Europe so as to rob Europeans of their Christian and national identities.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, tens of thousands of placards have been hung since the beginning of the campaign depicting Soros’ enlarged smiling face and the slogan, “Don’t let Soros have the last laugh!” Other placards show Soros as a puppet master making the opposition candidates dance.

Orban has already made life unbearable for refugees in Hungary by building a border fence, establishing camps at the borders, and launching a vicious crackdown on border crossings. In spite of criticism from Brussels, Orban continues to reject refugee resettlement quotas proposed by the EU. Based on anti-immigrant agitation, he has adopted a number of laws with Jobbik’s support.

Although Orban’s support is declining, he can be relatively confident of victory due to the miserable state of the opposition. The parties are fragmented and in some cases bitterly internally divided. The social democratic MSZP, which came second last time around, is set to suffer a major defeat. The Democratic Coalition (DK), a split-off from MSZP led by former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany, will be represented in parliament but will not play a significant role.

The Green LMP (Politics Can be Different) could also surpass the 5 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation. After a split in 2013, it underwent a sharp shift to the right. Lead candidate Bernadett Szel declared that immigration remains “a national issue.” Orban’s border fence should also stay in place, she said.

The extent of the social democrats’ and Greens’ lurch to the right was made clear at the beginning of the year, when the government decided to accept a few refugees entitled to subsidiary protection after they arrived in the country last year. The opposition on the left and right sharply criticised the government, claiming that refugees were “being accepted through the back door.” With the support of the MsZP and LMP, Jobbik applied for an emergency session of parliament.

Due to wide-ranging political agreement, several joint initiatives between the MSZP, LMP, and far-right Jobbik have occurred during the election campaign.

Sunday’s elections are being watched with mixed feelings in Europe’s capital cities. While criticism has focused on Budapest’s good relations with Moscow, praise has grown recently for Orban’s far-right policies.

In early January, the Austrian government of the conservative Austrian People’s Party and far-right Freedom Party extended a warm welcome to Orban in Vienna. At a press conference, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz noted the commonalities between both governments’ policies. “I am grateful that on protecting Europe’s borders, we are on the same page,” he said. “We must stop illegal immigration in order to guarantee security in the EU.”

Without being challenged, Orban was able to invoke the threat of a “mass migration of peoples” as the greatest danger for Central Europe. Orban subsequently met with investor Heinrich Pecina. In consultation with Orban, the founder of Vienna Capital Partners shut down *Népszabadság*, a newspaper critical of the government, in October 2016.

The German government also backs Orban. In January, he was the guest of a Christian Social Union party congress in Seeon, Bavaria. Horst Seehofer, who is now German interior minister, fully endorsed Orban’s anti-refugee policies and praised the self-appointed “border protection captain” for shutting down the Balkan route.

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