

Hungary's Orbán government seizes on coronavirus pandemic to establish dictatorship

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Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is using the COVID-19 epidemic to establish dictatorial rule. Following the declaration of a state of emergency on March 11, the country's parliament is to be effectively abolished with the introduction of an "Emergency Ordinance Act." The act will allow Orbán to take sole control of all spheres of power.

The act allows the government to suspend parliament indefinitely. Decrees from the prime minister must then merely be communicated to the president of parliament. The government can "suspend the application of individual laws, deviate from legal provisions and take other extraordinary measures." It is given the right to "suspend the application of certain laws by decree" and "introduce other exceptional measures to guarantee the stability of life, health, the personal and material security of citizens and the economy," the act reads.

On March 23 parliament refused to discuss the draft law when it was first introduced as an urgent motion. The rejection was possible because passing the act required a four-fifths majority. The government, however, will submit the bill a second time on March 31. This time the act requires a two-thirds majority of deputies, i.e., the majority which Orbán's party, Fidesz, already possesses in parliament.

The government plans to introduce criminal offences which would directly eliminate democratic rights. Anyone who publishes reports or messages that could hinder the "successful protection" of the public against the coronavirus can be punished with up to five years in prison. This means in plain language: Any criticism of official government propaganda is a punishable offense. Persons who violate quarantine regulations can also be imprisoned for between five and eight years.

Orbán is using the coronavirus epidemic as a pretext. From the start his government has ignored and downplayed the crisis. Despite the onset of the virus only around 6,000 people have been tested and the Hungarian health care system has already been stretched to its limits by a still relatively small number of cases.

In addition, Orbán's Fidesz party is using the coronavirus pandemic to conduct a vile racist and anti-Semitic campaign. The government has already expelled 13 Iranian students from the country for allegedly violating quarantine rules. The Iranians later said that the hygienic conditions they were subjected to were catastrophic and they had received no information with whom they had to share rooms.

Orbán has publicly stated that immigration is to blame for the spread of the infectious disease. At the same time, numerous journalists and scientists complain that the government has failed to release and/or falsified key data.

The government has said it will only deploy the new emergency laws until the end of the year, but its announcement should be given no credibility.

Since taking power in 2010, Orbán has persistently built up authoritarian structures. He has effectively abolished freedom of the press, filled important offices in the judiciary and administration with party loyalists, and waged a brutal campaign against refugees and those supporting them. Fidesz maintains close ties to far-right circles and glorifies leading figures in the fascist dictatorship which ruled Hungary in the 1930s and 1940s.

Orbán regards the coronavirus crisis as an opportunity to establish a dictatorial regime that will abolish any

parliamentary limits and maximize his personal power. The government has already placed 140 key companies under military supervision. In addition, the army is being extensively deployed for domestic control purposes, with military units patrolling the streets of the capital. At an event organized by the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MKIK), Orbán said that preparations had to be made for “brutal changes.”

According to defence minister Tibor Benkő, the aim of the military operation is to monitor and secure operations during the coronavirus epidemic. The sequestered companies include both state and private companies, including the Paks nuclear power plant, the MOL oil and gas group, electricity, water and gas suppliers, the stock exchange, several banks, transport companies, the post office, the MTVA media company and pharmaceutical companies. Defence ministry control teams consist of representatives of both the military and police.

The new measures are aimed directly at workers who refuse to work in dangerous conditions during the pandemic. In mid-March Orbán declared he saw no reason to close schools, and if he did, teachers would not be paid. He only changed his stance following a massive public outcry.

Audi, Opel, Mercedes and Suzuki have all stopped auto production in Hungary. Finance minister Mihály Varga has already spoken of a massive slump in economic performance due to the ongoing restrictions linked to the COVID-19 virus. For this eventuality the government has announced extensive corporate tax breaks.

At the same time opposition to the government dictatorship is growing across the country. Hungarian-born journalist Paul Lendvai has warned of a “transition to dictatorship” and a group of lawyers, including former constitutional judges, have launched an online petition against the new act. It received over 40,000 signatures within a few hours.

For its part there has been hardly any criticism of the new measures from the leadership of the European Union or individual European countries. Orbán is the European leader who is most advanced with his policy of using the current crisis to brutally attack the working class, but ruling elites across Europe are moving in the same direction.

In Poland, the right-wing governing party PiS has refused to postpone the presidential election in view of the dramatic development because it expects benefits for incumbent Andrzej Duda. In Germany, *Handelsblatt* published an interview with the financial investor Alexander Dibelius, who bluntly said that the deaths of millions of people should be preferred to an economic crash that endangers his assets and the wealth of his customers. For this reason, no further measures should be taken to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

In the United States, Donald Trump said at a press conference that he wanted American operations to reopen in a few “weeks, not months.” The ruling class is well aware that forcing workers back to their jobs under conditions of a deadly pandemic requires the use of dictatorial means and is incompatible with democracy.



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