

Hungary Gambles on Switch To Conservative Newcomer

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Budapest

Hungary might be called a nation of contrarians. It has held three elections since the collapse of communism — and has changed direction each time.

"We needed a party without a past. We wanted a new start," 24-year-old medical student Peter Dome said of Sunday's victory by the Hungarian Civic Party, or Fidesz, the only major party in the nation's crowded

fray that has never governed the country.

Dome's explanation was as good as any for the voters' decision to oust the ruling Socialist Party, even though Hungary has made significant strides under its leadership, such as being invited to join NATO and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Europe, and entering into preliminary talks on membership in the European Union.

But discomfort with the Socialists' communist lineage, a recent crime wave and lingering economic hardships led the voters to make another clean sweep — as they did in 1990 and 1994.

The election leaves Hungary with a rearranged political landscape that seems to be pulling toward the future and the past at the same time.

The yearning for a future more closely aligned with the West is embodied in Viktor Orban, who founded Fidesz in 1989 when he was a liberal, long-haired law student who preached that people over 35 couldn't be trusted.

Switch to Right

Now 34, Orban has made a sharp turn to the right. There is wide debate over whether the move is genuine or merely shows him to be a political opportunist.

Orban has never before held government office, and the direction he will choose as national leader remains unclear. One of Fidesz's key campaign promises — to deliver 7 percent growth in gross domestic product, up from the present 4 percent — has been criticized by some analysts as unrealistic and likely to overheat Hungary's economy.

In a talk Monday on national radio, Orban seemed eager to remind voters that he regards his new job as prime minister as a learning experience. He said he will continue to live in his private home so he can lead a normal life with his family and will not move into the official residence that comes with the post.

"I'm too young to be able to make the right decisions while being disconnected from the world," he said.

Strange Bedfellows

But Orban's destiny is bound up with the Independent Smallholders' Party, a party rooted in Hungary's prewar agrarian society and one that is oddly out of step with today's realities.

Fidesz won only 148 seats in Hungary's 386-member Parliament and its allies in the Hungarian Democratic Forum took 17. So the party needs the Smallholders' 48 seats to form a government.

The Smallholders have promised to build more housing, re-examine the privatization process, ban sales of land to foreigners, repeal road tolls and fatten social benefits — all of which would have negative effects on the economy.

Smallholders leader Jozsef Torgyan is widely viewed as a lime-light-adoring populist who is likely to revel in his new position of power. This could make Orban's life very difficult.

"No one knows how serious these parties are about keeping any of these promises," said Tibor Vidos, a political consultant. "I think Orban will be pragmatic. But Torgyan is the big question."

Since both men favor integration with Europe, no one believes Hungary will move so far to the right that its relations with the West will be adversely affected.

Echoes of Fascism

But the conservative message sent by the voters took on echoes of Hungary's fascist past through the election to parliament for the first time of the xenophobic, ultra-nationalist Hungarian Truth and Life Party.

Truth and Life, led by Istvan Csurka and known for its Nazi-style salutes and mass rallies, got 14 seats, alarming Central Europe's largest Jewish community — and many other Hungarians.

"We fear an extremist position may become an acceptable level of political discourse," said Peter Feldmajer, president of the Hungarian Jewish Communities, which represents the country's 80,000 Jews.

Csurka has said Hungary's half-million Gypsies "have been living among us far too long" and has spoken of conspiracies "against real Hungarian interests" by plotters from New York to Tel Aviv.

Beyond its racist rhetoric, the Truth and Life Party ran an organized campaign whose emphasis on crime and corruption resonated with those Hungarians who have failed to prosper in the post-communist era.

Worries About Crime

A rash of mafia-related bombings has shaken central Budapest, and a media tycoon was gunned down two months ago in broad daylight on a busy street. Budapest is still a safe city, but the incidents jarred a population that can still remember the near-zero crime rate of the communist era.

In addition, a series of political scandals tarred the Socialists, even though they were never tied directly to Prime Minister Gyula Horn. Horn's status as foreign minister in the last communist government, however, tainted his reputation among those with rightist leanings.

The Socialists wrongly believed that international accolades for Hungary's accomplishments would propel them to another term.

Several days before the election, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development declared Hungary's economy to be the best in Eastern Europe. Until very recently, Hungary had attracted more foreign investment than any other country in Eastern Europe — \$17 billion. Poland is now the leader, but it is four times the size of Hungary.

Yuppies, Poverty

In fact, the strategy failed. While cell-phone toting, BMW-driving yuppies enjoy Budapest's fine restaurants and expensive shops, the subway stops are still loaded with pensioners selling flowers and garlic for money to buy bread.

In 1995, the socialist government enacted a series of austerity measures such as devaluing the currency and curbing social benefits to cut the country's ballooning deficit and soaring inflation. To cut costs, they also raised the retirement age and increased utility costs. The program hit much of the population hard.

Over the last year, positive results of the policy were beginning to show. Inflation was falling and real wages were slowly rising.

For the voters, however, it was too little, too late.