

Accountability: from stardom to early retirement?

With three largely unknown, but nevertheless major players behind bars, albeit only briefly, and further major targets in sight, the accountability machine finally graduates to the big leagues. Yet, there is a distinct possibility that it won't stay there. The longing for accountability may decrease if the government procrastinates much further. The public might not have forgiven the Socialists, but inevitably popular anger is ebbing. If there is no genuine political desire for accountability in Fidesz – which there might not be for a variety of reasons – then there is a chance that as it has previously, the latest round of accountability can be slowly buried.

Accountability was probably the dominant buzzword of the 2010 campaign. Following the unceasing string of corruption affairs that politicians of the then-governing party were caught up in, the public was intensely receptive towards Fidesz' hazy promise of holding its predecessor accountable.

Like the catchy “lop-stop” (stop stealing) campaign of SZDSZ in 2002, this accountability project went pretty much nowhere thus far, unless one counts delving into philosophers' tenders as a major breakthrough in a country ridden with corruption.

Either the Sukoro or the Moscow commercial delegation building deal might prove to be the scandals that finally make the accountability pledge look serious: they both revolve around big money and implicate or potentially implicate major political players.

Tracking a fuzzy promise

Accountability was a controversial promise from the start because while sticking to a menacing tone, Fidesz politicians' refused to say what they meant by it. There is of course a legal accountability, meaning that those who broke the law are held accountable through the system of the administration of justice, as a few left-wing politicians had experienced already under the previous government (in fact, back then more began their journey through the judicial system than since the new government has been installed). It was also plain that there would be political accountability, which the voters applied ruthlessly last April by completely eliminating SZDSZ and cutting MSZP to size.

The problem with the former two forms of accountability is that the first is in the hands of a supposedly independent prosecution and judiciary, while the latter is up to the voters. But accountability for Fidesz appeared to have implied a third category, though in spite of the occasional journalistic prodding it never became clear what that was.

Stale winds

The only reasonable interpretation of this stern promise – under the assumption that Fidesz' intentions were both serious and within the bounds of the rule of law – suggested that the new government would not hamper a serious crackdown on political graft and provide for the resources necessary to uncover it.

But while both corruption and its criminal law prosecution are areas notorious for their lack of transparency, if the past two decades are any guide – and the lack of serious scandals actually suggest they are – then Fidesz' astounding sweep of the elections last April is just another instance of the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Counter the consensus

It is likely that even if the two abovementioned scandals do go further and tackle some medium-level players, they won't do much in terms of addressing the core problem, which is the hypocritical and designed-to-malfunction system of party financing. The reality of party financing is to Hungarian democracy what his portrait was to Dorian Gray. Except that as far as Hungarian democracy is concerned, even the original is nowhere near as pretty as it once was.

With a citizenry that is frankly obsessed with bargains and also prefers its democracy on the cheap, politicians dare not be open about the real costs of campaigns. Instead, they pick up comparatively trifling amounts in public funding and hardly anything at all from legal private sources. It's an open secret that the difference between the billions of forints it costs to run a major party's national campaign and the couple of hundreds of millions the parties can spend legally is mostly financed by kickbacks on public contracts, some of which incidentally also satisfy less public needs. If accountability were serious that would be the key issue to tackle, but it is hardly in the interest of the two main players in this regime to change the rules of the game.

Is justice blind?

Assuming that the accountability process does roll forward and decapitates a few more known left-wing political players – figuratively speaking, of course – several questions remain. Were the previous two terms really extraordinary in terms of the corruption in government, or did the eight years in succession just make the ruling parties' politicians more complacent? Or is – as some left-wingers allege – the prosecutor's office simply a haven for Fidesz-loyalists that is more keen on prosecuting corruption on the left?



We won't know for sure. Regardless, the fact that some measure of legal accountability was finally beginning to be imposed was excellent news: while citizens were outraged by the specifics of some of the corruption scandals that were unearthed, in reality they learned nothing that hadn't suspected already. What was novel about these scandals was that politicians of the sitting government were jailed one after the other.

Now that Fidesz alone controls all levels of government, future corruption scandals will almost inevitably involve its own. Even if the amount of corruption changes, it is such an endemic phenomenon that it is impossible that there will be none. The campaign finance system in itself is bound to generate further illicit manoeuvres for money collection.

If therefore Fidesz drives the accountability machine forward – which is desirable, sans the vengeful and crusading overtones – then it will soon run into the dilemma of whether to draw a line in May 2010 or to make a serious effort towards curbing corruption by applying justice more or less indiscriminately.

Twisted notions of justice

The odds are that it won't. The war-like attitude of the previous two decades has taught the two major parties that keeping the other down justifies many means that are ordinarily inconsistent with principles of good governance. Thus while Fidesz may have felt that accountability is a great rhetorical instrument for ousting the Socialists, it has thus far shown little inclination to make the term generally applicable.

Voters forget

As we hinted above, there is an even greater likelihood that even the anti-left accountability campaign won't fell any or many big names. The relative scarcity of major corruption scandals in spite of the pervasiveness of the phenomenon suggests that for much of the previous decade and a half an implicit or maybe even express agreement has been in effect between the major political players to give each other considerable latitude in terms of organising funding. Given the visceral political animosities, this agreement in itself is a major – though the perverse sort – of success.

Fidesz has a veritable choice whether to completely upend this agreement and either ruthlessly prosecute all left-wing scandals it can prove, or to genuinely move against corruption in general. Alternatively, it can score a few symbolic points and move on.

While right-wing voters may be hungering for more accountability, in all likelihood the issue will lose its lustre and for the most part voters will also move on even if no major character



is ever indicted (except for the few who already have been). Thus in spite of the palpable frustration in some rightist circles, in itself this risk is not overwhelming.

What is a genuine risk, however, is leaving the corruption issue completely unaddressed and hoping that the issue will not crop up during this term. That is bound to give especially anti-establishment Jobbik and LMP some much-needed publicity. At the very least, Fidesz could undertake a genuine reform of the campaign finance system. Unlike much of the hype Fidesz has generated with the rhetoric about the “revolution in the voting booth”, that would indeed be a bold and fundamental step towards a better democracy.