



Keeping the barbarians out

Qualifying for municipal elections just got a whole lot tougher

Though it happens slightly less frequently than Halloween, Hungarians have their own version of trick or treat. A couple of weeks before every election, party volunteers go door-to-door to collect signed endorsement sheets for their candidates. Depending on the election or the office at stake, a varying number of signatures is necessary to put a given candidate on the ballot.

Colloquially, these endorsement sheets are referred to as “kopogtatócédula”, loosely translated as knocking slips, which is a misnomer only insofar as in the age of doorbells knocking is rarely actually used. Doorbells, however, are ringing non-stop around the country these days.

In a country where disillusionment and frustration with politics is rampant, political polarisation is intense, and representatives of opposing parties are often regarded as enemies rather than opponents, this is an uncomfortable and often humiliating task even at the best of times, but occasionally it becomes outright dangerous, and signature collectors have been known to fall prey to violent attacks.

Every system of candidate registration is fraught with its own flaws. The Hungarian system has often been the subject of criticism, and for lack of space we will neither recap nor delve in the debate surrounding its relative merits. Suffice it to say that there has to be some system of weeding out candidates who might not even enjoy the support of their immediate family members but would nevertheless gladly clutter the ballot sheet.

But now Parliament - or specifically the government's parliamentary majority - has adjusted the rules concerning endorsement sheets, that is they have substantially increased the number necessary for parties to stand in local elections.

For a party to be listed on the ballot for a county assembly, it needs the signed support from 1% of eligible voters (up from 0.3%), and to stand as a candidate for mayor of Budapest, the number of signatures has quadrupled, from 0.5% of voters to a whopping 2%, nearly 30,000 signatures. To add a bit of a challenge to the more arduous task, the government's majority also shortened the period allowed for the collection of endorsement sheets from five weeks to 15 days.

If the Hungarian ballot sheets had until now been overrun by candidates who were abusing an all too lax registration process, then such a measure might have been a reasonable fix. But the fact is that if anything, on the whole the Hungarian registration process has been too restrictive.

By way of comparison, for the April parliamentary elections only six formations managed to get on the ballot nationally, and two of them failed to qualify in all counties - at a time when the popular disillusionment with the government ran so high that new parties should have mushroomed.

Even for the joint MDF-SZDSZ list - two long-established parties with a declining, but nevertheless comparatively substantial base of activists - it was difficult to get on the national ballot, and in some counties they failed entirely (the barely eked out sufficient endorsement sheets in their stronghold Budapest).

Another important aspect of this issue is that even before this procedural modification, the Hungarian party system was already one of the most closed democratic party systems in international comparison. Before 2006, only one new party ever managed to make it into Parliament, while most of the region was aflush with new parties (our advantage was stability, their advantage was the slightly easier replacement of corrupt and incompetent leaders.)

Of course we need to be careful not to conflate national elections with municipal elections - the current adjustments to the rules apply only to the latter - but the two issues are not entirely distinct either. For one, this adjustment may well signal the desire for a similarly restrictive approach for parties competing in national elections.

Moreover, gaining a foothold in municipal councils or winning mayoralties is key both for new parties seeking to broaden their base (for LMP this is especially crucial) and also for opposition parties that wish to retain some level of influence at the sub-national level of governance. Former President László Sólyom referred to local governments as the “schools of democracy”, but they are more than that: they are also breeding grounds for aspiring new politicians and a way for smaller parties to introduce themselves to voters and to nurture more enduring links with the electorate.

As long as the recently modified rules stand, new parties seeking to gradually expand by establishing local bases of support will be significantly impeded in their efforts. Right now, with Fidesz’ popularity at an apparent zenith and two new parties in Parliament - a revolutionary development by Hungarian standards - this may seem a remote worry.

But if Fidesz fails to retain this overwhelming level of support, which is very likely, and a significant proportion of voters will be dissatisfied with the choices of national parties available now, then this year’s amendment to the electoral procedure may well serve as a key instrument in stunting the growth of new political formations.

Of the parties now in Parliament, only the smallest, the also fairly recent LMP needs to really worry about fulfilling the new requirements for municipal elections, which is why they were also fretting most intensely about the measure (Jobbik was also up in arms, though it claimed that this was more out of a sense of justice since they would not have problems getting the required signatures. We’ll see.)

Apart from LMP, the question is now most pertinent for extra-parliamentary parties and candidates that would like to be on the ballot. The Budapest mayoral candidate for the far-left Green-Left party, Ádám Galba-Deák, admitted in an interview that collecting the necessary number of signatures is likely out of reach for him – adding that he expects he can collect twice as many as would have been necessary before Fidesz's amendment to the electoral procedure.

But the increased number of endorsement sheets was only one of the major amendments to the law governing municipal elections. The Fidesz majority in Parliament also significantly reduced the number of municipal representatives - one may quibble over the details, but a sensible move overall - and furthermore, in towns with 10,000 citizens or more they increased the share of councilpersons elected with a plurality of votes in individual districts (i.e. first-past-the-post) from 60% to 70%, with a corresponding reduction in the number of representatives elected by the more proportional compensation lists.

The latter change will reinforce the majoritarian element of the electoral system, clearly boosting the dominance of the strongest party and reducing the presence of the fragmented opposition in the municipal councils. The fact that in the national elections Fidesz won 173 out of 176 electoral districts with roughly 53% of voters casting a ballot for its candidates should help illuminate how one-sided political representation could become in the local councils due to the increasing weight of the first-past-the-post element in the municipal electoral system.

What makes this all the more convenient for the governing party is that as long as the opposition remains fragmented - given their intense loathing for each other, this seems like a distinct possibility - Fidesz' massive support could drop significantly below today's level without substantially affecting its expected overwhelming representation in the municipal councils.

The immediate effect of the changes is clear: the degree of Fidesz-dominance in the municipalities will be stunning and unparalleled. The long-term effect, especially in the context of national politics, is less straightforward, though we have highlighted some of the key issues above (e.g. decreased possibilities for new parties and the opposition to use municipalities as political training grounds and as counterweights to the Fidesz-majority in Parliament).

A key question is whether Fidesz will apply similar changes to the rules for national elections. If the candidate registration system were amended in such a way, that would effectively seal the already too closed electoral system to newcomers. As far as the ratio of MPs elected by (the runoff variant of) first-past-the-post vs. proportional representation (PR) and compensation lists is concerned, Fidesz has already made clear that it does not wish to touch the existing system beyond reducing the overall number of MPs.



Nor would it be rational: as long as the existing parties can hope to make it back into Parliament thanks to PR - albeit with a relatively puny representation as compared to the party that wins most of the electoral districts – the incentive to unite to defeat Fidesz is far less pressing than it would be if their survival as a parliamentary party depended on it. For divide and conquer, therefore, the current national electoral system might work even better than a pure first-past-the-post model would.