

The 2014 Hungarian Elections and Human Rights

On April 6, Hungary will hold its parliamentary elections under a revamped electoral system, and starting May 18, it will also hold elections for the European Parliament. Both elections will be watched with concern to see whether far-right nationalists, who are now represented in the Hungarian and European Parliaments, will increase their mandate.

The elections come amid concerns about the rise of neo-fascist parties in a number of European countries, particularly Hungary and Greece, and the appearance of armed militia groups in both countries. In Hungary in March 2014, a Jewish cemetery in the city of Tatabánya was desecrated with swastikas and slogans including "There was no Holocaust but there will be." Also this month, a survey found that up to 40% of respondents in Hungary showed antisemitic attitudes.

The Hungarian parliamentary elections will also be seen as an important referendum on the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Orban has been widely criticized for eroding Hungary's previous system of checks and balances, putting restrictions on the media, and using his two-thirds majority in parliament to change the election rules in ways that favor his party.

It is important that the media, human rights and democracy watchdogs be active in monitoring the election campaigns for antisemitic, anti-Roma, or homophobic statements by candidates; reporting on any threats or violence by their supporters; gauging the effect of restrictive media laws on election coverage; and evaluating the fairness of the new electoral system,

Human Rights First will be sending a team to Hungary to report on the elections and their aftermath.

As election season kicks off in Hungary, here are some important questions:

Who is running, and who is expected to win?

The top three parties are the ruling party, the rightist Fidesz, the leftist alliance Kormanyavaltas, and the far-right Jobbik. Polls show Fidesz's party is expected to hold on to power – but Jobbik is gaining strength.

Hungarian politics will turn on whether Prime Minister Orban again receives the two-thirds majority he needs to change the constitution at will, and whether Jobbik, now Hungary's second-largest party, will beat out the socialist alliance for second place.

Jobbik won 17% of the vote in 2010 under the leadership of Gábor Vona, founder of the now-banned Hungarian Guard militia. The party will run individual candidates as well as national list of candidates in every eligible district.

Some experts claim that Jobbik is moderating some of its rhetoric to appeal to more centrist voters, and several parties have sprung up on its extreme right flank. A Jobbik splinter party known as "Hungarian Dawn" (Nemzeti Forradalmi Part), fashioned after the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, will also run at least one candidate.

Fidesz critics assert that the ruling party, while denouncing antisemitic and anti-Roma sentiments, has itself struck a more strident, nationalist tone, including with coded appeals to extreme neo-nationalists:

- "Everyone will march against us. Honey-tongued bankers, greedy multinationals, the Brussels bureaucrats serving them and of course their local errand boys." – Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Sept. 23, 2013

Has hate crime in Hungary increased? Do Jews and Roma feel threatened?

Hungary does not collect hate-crime statistics, but intimidation is on the rise. Jewish and Roma leaders have expressed fear of the future, and report increased attacks against persons and property.

A recent study by a group of Hungarian NGOs, "Creating a National Hate Crimes Strategy and Action Plan," found that hate crime is under-reported and authorities do not collect proper data. The NGOs said, "The number of bias motivated crimes (hate crimes) has been on the rise in the last couple of years. This has been affecting most severely the Roma, LGBT people, Jews and immigrants or refugees coming to Hungary." They made a series of recommendations for addressing the problem.

Roma are Hungary's largest minority, making up about 7% of the country's 10 million residents. In a 2008 survey by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, nearly one in five Hungarian Roma reported being victims of serious harassment, threats or assaults with a racist ethnic motive in the previous 12 months.

A spree of attacks in 2008 and 2009 killed six Roma, including a 4-year-old boy, and wounded 55 people, almost all of them Roma. Four neo-Nazis were convicted and are serving prison sentences. In a study by the Hungarian Equal Treatment Authority, 95% of Roma surveyed said they believed that ethnic discrimination is widespread and growing.

Jews living in Hungary reported similar discrimination in a 2012 European Union survey:

- 90% percent of respondents who consider themselves Jewish reported antisemitism to be "a very big" or a "fairly big" problem.
- 90% said antisemitism has increased in the past five years
- 75% said that they frequently hear that Jews have too much power in the country
- 59% had heard Jews being blamed for the current economic crises
- 57% heard someone say that Jews have exploited Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes.

LGBT Hungarians are also worried, as Jobbik has been working to pass an anti-gay rights law.

Hungary is a democracy and a member of the European Union. Will the elections be free and fair?

A number of experts believe the elections will be free, but not fair. Some say Hungary's democracy is eroding:

- "The whole election framework – the laws, the institutions and even the new electorate – favors Fidesz because the governing party has used its four years in office with its two-thirds majority in the parliament to redesign every aspect of the electoral system to its advantage." - Kim Lane Scheppelle, Princeton University
- "The allied opposition parties will have to get as many as 6-8% more votes than Fidesz to gain a simple parliamentary majority, mainly because of gerrymandered districts." – Scheppelle
- "We can say that the April 6 elections will be free but not fair: there are several changes in the system that benefits Fidesz – but it does not mean that Fidesz cannot be defeated at the polls." – Political Capital, Budapest, Hungary
- "Following the 2010 general elections in Hungary, the governing majority gained more than two thirds of the seats in parliament, enabling it to rapidly initiate intense legislative activity to reshape the whole constitutional order of the country (the former constitution has been amended twelve times and the Fundamental Law four times so far) and thus substantially to modify the institutional and legal framework, as well as a number of fundamental aspects of not only public but also private life." – Rui Tavares, Member of the European Parliament and rapporteur for its Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Affairs.
- "I survived two dictatorships. It's possible that the third one is now on its way." - György Konrád, writer, Budapest

For more information please contact Corinne Duffy at DuffyC@humanrightsfirst.org or 202-370-3319.