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## Where did it all go wrong for the MSZP?

Posted on 13 April 2010, Author: Dan Nolan

Socialist party hit the mat long before election writ was dropped



As yet another chapter in Hungary's stormy history closed in anti-climactic scenes of resignation and deflation as the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) conceded defeat from its party headquarters on Sunday night, delegates' conversations picked over a truly tumultuous four years.

The end of an era atmosphere was not misplaced, as those present looked back at the austerity measures drawn up in the summer of 2006, the leaking of the Balaton?szöd "lies" speech that August and the ensuing anti-government riots and two-year protest outside parliament, the disintegration of the MSZP's coalition with the moribund liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), the party's gaining of only one more European Parliament seat than the ascendant far-right party Jobbik's three MEPs at the EP elections in the summer of 2008, the IMF-led bailout of Hungary via a credit line later that year and, of course, the inevitable resignation of the original architect of the party's election victory, Ferenc Gyurcsány.

Tired of the fight

Party chairwoman Ildikó Lendvai's prosaic response that "one thing is clear: the MSZP has lost the opportunity to govern," demonstrated the current lack of inspiration in the party after a bruising term of office.

But perhaps the more poetically inclined considered the events of the evening of 20 August 2006, when fireworks were in place across Budapest for the Day of Saint Stephen, the monarch who crushed paganism, embraced Western Europe's Christianity and laid the foundations for modern Hungary over a millennium ago.

Having joined the EU in 2004 and recently become the first former Soviet satellite state to

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return a government to power in back-to-back elections, on that fateful August night a school of thought still remained that Hungary was following up on its early promise as the CEE nation most likely to bed in a modern, pragmatic, settled democracy. Hundreds of thousands flanked the Danube's banks despite the evening's budget being half that of previous years. Then, at one minute to nine – timing so unfortunate that even the schlockiest Hollywood producer would have rejected it as a corny attempt at foreshadowing – a massive storm hit, tearing down trees, bringing mass panic, death, destruction and denial. Corny or not, it was an omen for what was to come. So much so that, as party chairman Lendvai and MSZP leadership candidate Attila Mesterházy – roles that Gyurcsány held simultaneously during his tenure – took to the stage to admit defeat on Sunday night, it was an unlikely thought that only four years earlier the party had somehow galvanised its spirit and popular support to beat Viktor Orbán's Fidesz into second place.

So much not done

Since then the party has failed across the board: failed to persuade the electorate that its austerity measures might eventually make the country a better, fairer place; failed to properly address the issue of Hungary's disenfranchised Roma community; failed to slim down Hungary's Kafka-esque bureaucratic apparatus, failed to combat massive internal corruption that has seen Budapest district mayors and even an MP, János Zuschlag, end this election cycle behind bars. The MSZP, the successor of the hated communist party, has often been dismissed as elitist, high-handed and out of touch: the fact that Gyurcsány posted on his own blog the aforementioned "lies" speech, in which he told party delegates at a private meeting in May 2006 that he had "lied morning, noon and night" about Hungary's economy in order to win the election, immediately after it had been leaked to the media, suggested that these accusations were on the money. For all Gyurcsány's failings, however, he had for a time appeared able to unite a party split between communist-era apparatchiks and Blairite neo-liberals. As it turned out, it had been a compromise that led to unsustainable policies and widespread resentment. On Gyurcsány's departure last spring, the MSZP controversially opted to support a crisis cabinet partly comprised of non-party-affiliated "experts". Humiliating reports said half a dozen people had turned down the premiership, most notoriously the CEO of the Hungarian subsidiary of a vacuum cleaner manufacturer. The nation forwarded satirical text messages that offered the premiership to the recipient, and requested that they forward the job offer to everyone in their phone book. The MSZP had become a joke and, as taxes and unemployment soared, not a very funny one. Yet the man who eventually accepted the job, Gordon Bajnai, has kept a cool head and acquitted himself well, keeping his distance from the mud wrestling match that passes for public discourse in this country. Bajnai was essentially following the post-crisis instructions of the IMF, but managed to do so with a dignity that had by last month seen his approval rating among international credit rating companies rise from 7% to 41%. Although he will disappear now, having always maintained that he took the job for one year only, the non-party member – who was economy minister in Gyurcsány's cabinet – has spoken at several MSZP rallies during this campaign, and political power of the sort he has tasted is notoriously moreish.

Vacuum

Last year's choice of Mesterházy – whose demeanour on Sunday night made one feel that somewhere an estate agency was missing a sales manager – to lead the party into the election suggested that the party had resigned itself to losing the battle and was concentrating on winning the war. A better route to the MSZP's pensioner core vote might have been offered by old party hand László Kovács, freshly returned from Brussels after his stint as an EC tax commissioner. However Kovács's cheery demeanour and faded jeans on Sunday night suggested that he might be considering retirement himself. For now, Mesterházy is being touted as the future. He told the MSZP faithful on Sunday night that "the Socialist Party must be evaluated in terms of the last four, eight and 20 years, and this assessment used as a new foundation to build a democratic left". Maybe the MSZP can indeed find the wherewithal to regroup, find a new direction and return to the fray as a party that can punch its weight with Fidesz. The vast majority of Hungary's electorate will appreciate its greater ideological distance from Jobbik than Fidesz, and the MSZP could return to its roots as Hungary's voice of the left. The anti-corruption green party Lehet Más a Politika will not want to identify itself too closely with the Socialists either, while its old ally the SZDSZ appears gone forever. The MSZP is alone. But, as evidenced above, Hungary is sure to witness a whole new brand of drama in the years until the next general election in 2014. Lendvai claimed on Sunday night that the MSZP "has not lost, in fact it wants to grasp the opportunity to be the strongest opposition party", a statement that showed none of the chutzpah of the Gyurcsány era. We cannot rule out the return of the power-hungry Gyurcsány either, while a Socialist Party led by his old friend and colleague Bajnai could also be a viable option. But with the right wing now set to dominate Hungarian politics for at least one government cycle, the opposition MSZP will now at the very least have the

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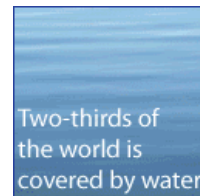
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