



Opinion

09.04.18

Why is Orbán so strong?

László Andor on how Hungary's nationalist prime minister has grasped and held onto power.

On 8 April, Hungarian voters sealed a third consecutive victory for the right-wing nationalist prime minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party's anti-immigrant platform. In recent years, Hungary has often been cited as an example of democratic backsliding. Fidesz has hollowed out the rule of law, alongside social dialogue and the welfare state. Declining school standards and a miserable health care system are part of everyday life for most Hungarians. Since 2011, Hungary has seen unprecedented emigration, amid evermore evidence of systemic corruption and embezzlement of EU funds. No wonder Hungary's economic performance lags behind comparable countries like Poland, Slovakia or Romania. In democratic systems, such experiences normally bring down governments. Instead, Fidesz today is celebrating a massive victory. To understand why the party is so strong, one must consider a number of factors and take a longer term historical perspective.

1. Orbán has been the leader of the strongest political party since about 2000. Orbán governed in coalition with smaller centre-right parties from 1998 to 2002. Since then, his party has incorporated much of those parties' voting base. He was in opposition for 8 years (2002-10), during which the Socialist Party (MSZP) only managed to win by being the strongest party for a few months (in both 2002 and 2006). Previously, in the early and mid 1990s, the centre-right was fragmented in Hungary. Orbán united them, and the right's core social base (the conservative upper and middle classes) want to remain united behind him.
2. Orbán united the right on his political economy agenda - to correct the imbalances of the economic transition to a market system, which created excessive foreign ownership in Hungary. This is a long-term programme, unfinished and unfinishable, and has helped forge a commitment to the leader on the right. Originally, this was a far-right agenda, which Orbán appropriated for the centre-right. Economic nationalism is a core issue for

Fidesz. In recent years, it has pushed back foreign ownership in various sectors, and the beneficiaries of this agenda consider it more important than upholding democratic standards.

3. Orbán created cultural hegemony by occupying and expropriating some themes that resonate with many Hungarians. These include support for minority Hungarians in neighbouring countries, support for sports (especially football and the legacy of legendary Hungarian player Ferenc Puskás legacy, but also the Olympics), and the memory of the 1956 uprising against the Soviet Union. Religion is also important: there is a strong correlation between those who believe in God and those who believe in Orbán.
4. Orbán was lucky to have the general elections in 2010 when people felt the fallout from the global financial crisis of 2008-9. This was bad for incumbents everywhere but it allowed Orbán to achieve 2/3 majority in parliament, which he used to change the constitution (not discussed before the election, so also not a promise or something people expected). He started to change the rules of the game in order to eliminate the tools he had used to get into power. (For example, it became virtually impossible to run a referendum on issues the government would not agree with.)
5. The 2010 defeat practically eliminated the Free Democrats and heavily damaged the MSZP which had been the strongest party in four elections since 1990 (in '94, '98, '02 and '06). MSZP lost its base among the less educated and the poor, who went to and have stayed with Fidesz and the far-right Jobbik party, especially in rural areas. A split in 2011 further weakened the socialists, who also were haunted by the image of economic incompetence (partly deserved) and corruption (often exaggerated). The fragmentation of the centre and left (there was also a split among the Greens and some start-up parties emerged in the middle) helped Orbán to another 2/3 majority in 2014 (even if in this case he only had 1 more mandate than necessary for constitutional majority, and he later lost that after a by-election).
6. In 2010 Orbán knew that support would wane, and he used his 2/3 majority to reorganise the political system. He changed the electoral law and made it even more disproportional than before (abolishing the first round of the elections, surrealistic gerrymandering etc.). He brought state media under his control, gave citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries and allowed them to vote by mail, which was not given to Hungarians who have residence in Hungary but work in the UK or elsewhere abroad. Checks and balances on executive power were diminished. Financial incentives were created to stimulate the formation of bogus parties and ensure that some anti-government votes went to waste, which indeed happened in both 2014 and 2018.
7. After 2014, in his second mandate, Orbán went further. He openly spoke about the "illiberal state" as a model to be followed. His cronies acquired vast shares in private (printed and electronic) media, which means that opposition voices and views have a very limited chance to reach the rural population. With the help of a rogue Austrian investor,

Orbán got the main political (left-liberal) broadsheet newspaper of the country (*Népszabadság*) closed and he has launched a witch hunt against civil society, especially those exposing corruption. Intimidation goes to extremes when opposition candidates or their relatives can just be sacked from their jobs. A huge share of the state budget goes to Fidesz propaganda. The State Audit Office has imposed an arbitrary fine on opposition parties. Dirty tricks may happen in other places, but for Fidesz dirty tricks have become the norm.

8. The 2015 refugee crisis came handy, and Orbán managed to exploit Hungarians' fear of migrants. Anti-migrant hysteria in the last three years has been unprecedented and plays an important role in rallying Orbán's voting base. Those who protested the inhumane treatment of refugees were considered enemies, and Orbán started to suppress civic activity on the grounds of national security. In Fidesz propaganda, Hungary is under attack from those who want to flood it with (Muslim) immigrants: Brussels, George Soros and the United Nations, which can only be stopped if Orbán remains in power. The 2018 Fidesz campaign was built on this sole topic, which for Orbán and his supporters became a symbol of national autonomy and security.
9. The European People's Party has provided cover for Orbán. Despite dismantling the rule of law in an EU member state, the EPP has protected him in order to avoid losing a member and in exchange for economic and political favours (e.g. for German businesses in Hungary like Audi, Deutsche Telekom etc.). The German Christian Social Union (CSU), Bavarian sister party to Angela Merkel CDU, has played a pivotal role in whitewashing Orbán's autocratic rule, and only rejected his wildest ideas like re-introducing the death penalty or voter registration. Orbán has also pleased his German allies by championing fiscal austerity, in contrast with the previous period when Hungary struggled with excessive deficits.
10. Many in Hungary have lost hope, including opposition politicians who in recent years started to play for mere survival and a place in parliament, instead of finding ways to change the government. Orbán has successfully played divide and rule with the opposition, and many old and new political figures played into his hand. Various opportunities to form a more united opposition were missed, while centrist and left-wing forces came to the 2018 elections in a fragmented state, leaving many voters puzzled as to whom they should vote for in constituencies and on party lists. Some consolidation on the left has taken place with the creation of a socialist-liberal-left green alliance with a single top candidate. Despite the dismal results, this may be the basis for centre-left renewal, as long as the "Alliance for Change" between MSZP and the Párbeszéd (Green Left party) under the leadership of Gergely Karácsony and Ágnes Kunhalmi gains confirmation and achieves better results in the 2019 European and municipal elections.

Democratic resilience for a populist age

How to make our democracies more resilient, if not altogether immune, to anti-democratic threats is a central question of our time, writes Helmut K. Anheier.

The enemies of open, liberal societies have gained disconcerting influence in recent years, demonstrated most recently by the Polish government's bid to place the country's courts under political control. Although many democracies are plagued by serious maladies – such as electoral gerrymandering, voter suppression, fraud and corruption, violations of the rule of law, and threats to judicial independence and press freedom – there is little agreement about which solutions should be pursued.

How to make our democracies more resilient, if not altogether immune, to anti-democratic threats is a central question of our time. Fortunately, we have not yet reached William Butler Yeats's bleak scenario, in which “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” On the contrary, many citizens and some governments have been actively standing up against authoritarian challenges, and are discovering new ways to defend democratic values and institutions. After massive protests, Polish President Andrzej Duda vetoed two of the three bills that sought to curtail the courts' independence.

Today's defenders of liberal democracy recognize that nothing can be taken for granted. Any democratic system can develop deficiencies over time. No democracy is perfect or constant. It is a dynamic system that requires calibration and innovation to adapt to changing circumstances and emerging threats. After all, as former US Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson once put it, a “constitution is not a suicide pact.”

Democratic resilience demands that citizens do more than bemoan deficiencies and passively await constitutional reform. It requires openness to change and innovation. Such changes may occur incrementally, but their aggregate effect can be immense.

One can find powerful examples of democratic resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, which is also home to brazenly populist regimes, not least in Hungary and Poland. In this region, mass protests have traditionally been a weapon of last resort. Today, they have become a primary vehicle for citizens to speak out against overweening and abusive governments.

Earlier this year, tens of thousands of Romanians took to the streets to protest a government decree that would have decriminalized certain forms of corruption committed by public

officials. Not long after, Hungarian citizens congregated in Budapest's public squares to protest Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's attacks on civil-society institutions, particularly Central European University.

And in 2016, Poland's right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) government faced mass demonstrations in response to many of its policies, including measures aimed at banning abortion and limiting the independence of the Constitutional Court. When such protests have been large enough, and sustained over a long enough period of time, they have forced governments to withdraw or soften their proposals.

Beyond protests, another way to improve democratic resilience is to equip political institutions with internal safeguards. For example, the United States has term limits and sunset provisions for the appropriation of funds; and the United Kingdom has the Investigatory Powers Tribunal and other special agencies to hold the government accountable for its actions. Such mechanisms are crucial for ensuring that civil and political rights are protected, especially when governments are responding to multiple safety and security threats simultaneously.

These mechanisms can take different forms, depending on the country. Some actions are appropriately initiated by governments "from above," in response to pleas by political movements and civil-society groups. Other actions are taken by citizens "from below," to give a voice to excluded groups, improve access to voting, and strengthen democratic processes.

Governments and citizens thus have a rich set of options – such as diversity quotas, automatic voter registration, and online referenda – for addressing democratic deficiencies. Moreover, there are measures that can also help citizens mount a defense of democracy against authoritarian assaults.

To that end, organizations can be created to channel protest and dissent into the democratic process, so that certain voices are not driven to the political fringe. And watchdog groups can oversee deliberative assemblies and co-governance efforts – such as participatory budgeting – to give citizens more direct access to decision-making. At the same time, core governance institutions, like central banks and electoral commissions, should be depoliticized, to prevent their capture by populist opportunists.

When properly applied, these measures can encourage consensus building and thwart special interests. Moreover, such policies can boost public trust and give citizens a greater sense of ownership vis-à-vis their government.

Of course, some political innovations that work in one context may cause real damage in another. Referenda, for example, are easily manipulated by demagogues. Assemblies can become gridlocked, and quotas can restrict voters' choices. Fixing contemporary democracy will inevitably require experimentation and adaptation.

Still, recent research can help us along the way. *The Governance Report 2017* has compiled a diverse list of democratic tools that can be applied in different contexts around the globe – by governments, policymakers, civil-society leaders, and citizens.

In his contribution to the report, German sociologist Claus Offe, Professor Emeritus of the Hertie School and Humboldt University identifies two fundamental priorities for all democracies. The first is to secure all citizens' basic rights and ability to participate in civic life; the second is to provide a just and open society with opportunities for all citizens. As it happens, these two imperatives are linked: democratic government should be “of,” “by,” and *for* the people.

Many of the innovations highlighted in the report are meant to enhance citizen engagement. The goal is to encourage citizens to defend not just their own interests, but also those of the larger civic community.

Some might think that this is asking too much. But democracies fail when citizens become complacent or alienated, and when populists are allowed to exploit such sentiments. Democracy will always have imperfections. Only by working together can citizens inoculate it against the most dangerous threats to its survival.

This article was published by Project Syndicate on 27 July.