

Hungary gets taste of free elections

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Susan Viets in Budapest

HUNGARIANS will today have their first taste of free elections in 40 years.

They will be voting in four parliamentary byelections, in which candidates from the Socialist Workers' Party, as the ruling Communist Party is known, the opposition, and independents are standing.

In Gödöllő, a town close to Budapest, campaign posters have plastered walls for nearly two months. Some of the flimsy black-and-white mimeographs are uninspiring and, to a Westerner, seem amateurish.

Mr Gabor Roszik, on the other hand, stares out of a slick and eye-catching colour poster. He is the candidate of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, one of the largest opposition groups.

Mr Roszik has been the talk of Gödöllő this summer. He fought nine candidates to emerge as one of two opposition finalists contesting the seat. His slogan is: "The power should serve the people, and not the other way round".

Three of the four seats being contested today were vacated by MPs threatened by their constituents with recall, a new Hungarian phenomenon.

The first recall in 43 years was made by the opposition youth movement, Fidesz, last November. Their target was Mr Miklos Vida, the former Speaker of Parliament. Fidesz objected to the way Mr Vida handled the parliamentary vote to build a controversial hydro-electric dam on the Danube

river. Mr Vida later resigned.

Since then, recalls have become a craze, making life uncomfortable for MPs and sometimes turning into effective action in Parliament. Recently, when the government proposed substantial cuts to local councils' spending as part of an austerity package, MPs forced it to reduce the cuts.

The biggest opposition complaint in the byelections is that it does not have enough campaign funding. A leading paper, the Daily News, reported that in Gödöllő "rumours were spread that the Communist Party had put up £10,000 for the campaign while, in comparison, the opposition could field £100".

Although excitement is high at the unprecedented prospect of opposition candidates becoming MPs, the actual impact on Parliament will be minimal.

Parliament, for now, has its hands tied. The opposition, arguing that the current assembly is not legitimate because it was chosen under the former non-democratic system last month persuaded the party to take important legislation off its agenda until September.

Three-sided talks are being carried out by the party, the nine main opposition groups, and the unions and leftwing groups. Joint committees are drafting a new electoral law, which will later be submitted to Parliament for ratification.

The country will, however, be watching today's elections carefully as an indicator of the party's popularity and the opposition's strength, in the run-up to the first general election scheduled for early next year.

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