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Opposition scrapes victory on how to choose President

Referendum blow for Hungary rulers

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Susan Viets and agencies in Budapest

FOUR opposition parties have won a referendum by a mere 6,600 votes, forcing the government to postpone presidential elections until after multi-party parliamentary elections have taken place next spring.

The result of Sunday's plebiscite, announced yesterday, is a blow to the ruling Socialist Party which was formed when the Communist Party disbanded last month.

Mr Imre Pozsgay, the reformist leader of the Socialists, would have been a hot favourite for direct presidential elections in the scheduled January election. But he is thought to have little chance of being elected after the parliamentary elections, when the President will be chosen by Parliament.

Mr Pozsgay said: "It seems there will be slight majority for yes," the coalition stand. The results will be confirmed today.

He added: "No doubt I have to concede that if the president is elected by Parliament my chances are smaller than if the president is elected by a direct vote."

The ballot's other three questions were approved overwhelmingly. Some 95.1 per cent of voters said that party organisations should leave the workplace, 95.4 per cent voted for the

Socialist Party to divulge its assets, and 94.9 per cent favoured disbanding the Workers' Militia, a party army already in a stage of dissolution.

The four victorious opposition parties — the Alliance of Free Democrats, the Federation of Young Democrats (Fidesz), the Social Democratic Party and the Independent Smallholders' Party — toasted their victory in champagne.

Mr Pozsgay's statement followed a cliff-hanging vote count. Election officials stopped issuing preliminary results on Monday after an early six-point government lead in the referendum narrowed to just 0.2 percentage points, with 91.3 per cent of the votes counted.

Victory was unexpected by many in the coalition. Mr Gaspar Miklos Tamas, the Alliance leader, jubilantly flashed the victory sign when the trends became clear. He said: "I did not know what was going to happen. The advance polls were good but Hungarian public opinion is mercurial. I just sat back with my fingers crossed."

The referendum also spelt defeat for the Hungarian Democratic Forum, the strongest opposition party, which had called for a poll boycott. The boycott call failed to depress the turnout, which reached 58.2 per cent.

Mr Tamas said the referendum has helped to establish a clear-cut split in the opposition,

which could help to create a clearer political situation in Hungary. Although the Forum has its own presidential candidate, many Forum members support Mr Pozsgay. Some observers saw the boycott call as a tacit gesture of support for the state minister, who has played a major role in the reforms sweeping Hungary.

The Free Democrats spokesman, Mr Ivan Peto, said they had no objections against changes in the law to enable citizens, not members of parliament, to elect the head of state after the parliamentary elections — but only if the presidency were reduced to a post of merely representational nature.

Mr Pozsgay told the news conference he did not aspire to be a weakened figurehead.

He added: "The scope and authority of the president as defined today is strong enough in helping create a balance and division of power. But at the same time it is weak enough not to become the seat of arbitrary power."

The Acting Speaker of Parliament, Mr Istvan Fodor, said on Sunday a "yes" vote on the issue of the presidential elections would probably lead parliament to dissolve itself on December 18.

Hungary's first multi-party parliamentary elections since 1947 would then be most likely to take place in March.

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