

Poll leaders seek coalition partners

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Susan Viets in Budapest

THE two parties to emerge with most seats from the first round of Hungary's general election have begun efforts to form pacts with smaller parties to give them a better chance of outright victory in the second round next month.

Of 386 seats in parliament, 125 were filled in the first round, with 40 taken by the right-of-centre Democratic Forum and 34 by the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats. Of the remaining 261 seats, 171 will be decided in second-round constituency battles on April 8, and 90 will be distributed by proportional representation based on the overall standing of the parties.

In Budapest yesterday, the president of the Forum, Jozsef Antall, said his efforts were concentrated on wooing the Independent Smallholders' Party, which won 16 first-round seats.

"We haven't visited any party headquarters yet," said Mr Antall, but he added that he hoped a compromise

over the Smallholders' land policy could be reached.

The Alliance leader, Janos Kis, said the second round would determine "whether the country will be governed by a national Christian coalition or a social liberal one".

His party has challenged the Forum to a televised debate to highlight the Free Democrats' policy of rapid privatisation before the next election.

The Forum for its part is retaliating with a campaign claiming that the Alliance is dominated by marxists.

An advertisement in the Hungarian daily, Magyar Hirlap, warned people to pay attention to their politicians' political ancestry, and Mr Antall yesterday called them "ex-communists teaching us liberalism".

In the meantime, the offices of both main parties remained closed and guarded as leaders huddled to plot their strategy.

Both parties are hoping to build a governing coalition with the smaller parties, avoiding the unpalatable prospect of a forced marriage.

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