

Assembling the anti-Orbán coalition

With the agreement between Gordon Bajnai and Attila Mesterházy, the left is finally making genuine advances towards an electoral alliance for 2014. But many key issues remain unresolved and there are numerous crucial details that might lead to conflicts down the road. Most importantly, the question of whom the alliance will nominate to challenge Orbán has been tabled - with strong claims by both Mesterházy and Bajnai, this could be a bloody fight within the larger battle.

Though at snail's pace, most of the Hungarian left-wing opposition is clearly moving towards an alliance. At the same time, the prospective members of the alliance are obviously wary of one another, and each move towards co-operation is accompanied by words or gestures that belie their ostensible friendliness towards the potential partners. While everyone agrees in theory that an alliance is ineluctable and most likely the only chance - such as it is - to defeat Fidesz, no one wants to make the mistake of becoming the sucker that ends up sacrificing too much on the altar of co-operation. Given the assumption that ultimately everyone will have to yield to the imperative of joining forces, the contenders must play a charade: pretend to be committed to an agreement but at the same time seeking to extort from the others a high price for actually being, well, agreeable.

A major step

This explains the recent unwittingly comical back and forth between former PM Gordon Bajnai and MSZP Chairman Attila Mesterházy. Recently Bajnai's formation, E14, proclaimed that the alliance business should be concluded by 23rd October - not coincidentally the anniversary of his comeback announcement. MSZP countered that the haste is unwarranted, and promptly proceeded to invite Bajnai to begin consultations. Bajnai in turn rejected the invitation, arguing somewhat oddly that it was too early for that. Finally, after exchanging some irate public messages, public reconciliation followed: MSZP invited Bajnai to join the meeting of its Board, which Bajnai said he would do, though only to tout his own schedule, he added.

Finally, he must have done more than that, because the press reported white smoke rising from the meeting. Bajnai and Mesterházy agreed on a breakthrough: they will field joint candidates in each of the single-member constituencies, which make up over half the seats in Parliament. In order to be victorious, there is no alternative to winning a majority of these seats. And to even have a shot at winning a majority, there is no alternative to combining electoral forces in the constituencies. Despite the major breakthrough, however, the devil is in the details, and further conflicts are likely. How many of the 106 candidates will each of the formations involved be allowed to nominate? How will the safe seats be distributed among the parties? Will the MSZP machine actually campaign for E14 candidates, who will likely be understaffed? And, the most thorny issue, who will be the PM candidate?

Never easy

A fundamental conflict between the two parties is that E14 is seeking to engage MSZP from a position of equality, having learned that junior partners in coalition governments, and specifically MSZP's long time partner, SZDSZ, tend to be squeezed fatally between the demands of coalition loyalty and the need to preserve a distinct identity. Yet the problem is that as of now the polling data do not justify treating E14 as an equal. Since it is a new formation that never contested a general election, there is no objective factor to underpin its aspirations to co-rule the left with MSZP. Some analysts argue that this quandary underlies Bajnai's delaying tactics, which seem at odds with his demand that an alliance be formed quickly: if E14 can get some traction in the polls, MSZP might be more amenable to treat it as an equal.

Still, it appears unlikely that in the near future E14 will achieve a major breakthrough that will put its standing in the polls on par with MSZP. In fact, it will have to fight hard for gaining any ground. For one, many uncommitted voters belong to the low information segment of society and are - if they commit at all - considerably more likely to choose established brand names than newcomers. And while E14 may sound like a preservative to many, MSZP's name and logo are recognised even by functional illiterates. Second, with Fidesz pushing pocketbook issues, the left feels once again compelled to advance a populism of its own, which comes more naturally to the Socialists than to Bajnai, whose successful brand owes in large part to the painful but ultimately successful financial consolidation following the international financial crisis.

Modernity and tradition clash

As the leader of the largest opposition party Attila Mesterházy would normally have a natural claim to the PM candidacy, but then these times are anything but normal. In contrast to Mesterházy, Bajnai's strength is purely virtual, his position as the frontrunner of the left is based on the - as of yet untested - presumption that he commands the respect of large segments of potential opposition voters, including many MSZP supporters, but more importantly also of many who would not vote for MSZP but might be inclined to endorse Bajnai in light of the fond memories of the political stability during his brief term in office.

Even as it turns out that Bajnai's position is more volatile than was previously thought - for now, his pull in the polls is point weaker than his supporters had anticipated -, it would be foolish to underestimate the potential difference his name could make. If MSZP seeks to govern rather than merely expand its representation and reassert its hegemonic position on the left, then the relevant issue is not only whether the party can pull in, say, 35% or 40% of the votes by nominating its own chairman as prime minister. The question is whether a Socialist candidate can get either MSZP alone or even a coalition of left-wing parties enough support to edge out Fidesz. If MSZP's candidate plateaus at a level that is insufficient to best the governing party, then it is ultimately irrelevant how much stronger MSZP is than E14 or the other left-wing forces; it's just not strong enough.

Hard choices

Much of Bajnai's support among left-wing intellectuals derives from the perception that for a variety of reasons he is "the Man" to beat Orbán. MSZP might be right to counter that the "Men" - who recently tended to be formally or substantially non-party people - come and go, but the party remains. Anyway, in 2014, just like in the last 20 years, all roads towards a left-wing majority will lead through MSZP, its remaining base, activists, resources and brand once again.