

Internet tax sparks anti-Orban activists protest in Hungary

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY: When Balazs Gulyas set up a Facebook page about a new Internet tax he had no idea he would soon be organising one of Hungary's biggest demos in years.

"By the time I got home from the university by bike, several thousands had joined (the page)," the softly spoken, bespectacled 27-year-old economics student told AFP.



Budapest: Protests led to Viktor Orban backing down. (image: Wikimedia Commons)

Within a few days, 20,000 people were marching on the streets of Budapest.

Two more days and it was 50,000 and there were also protests in other towns and cities.

And by Friday, Prime Minister Viktor Orban had temporarily shelved the tax - a rare climb-down for the right-wing Orban, 51, one of the most controversial leaders in the European Union, accused at home and abroad of autocratic tendencies.

"It was a great success that Orban retreated and the first time in his life that he admitted he is not representing the majority," Gulyas said.

Moreover, Orban's move showed that six months into his latest term, a new breed of tech-savvy young activists is being forced to fill the void left by a weak, divided and demoralised mainstream opposition.

Internet tax set off alarm bells

It remains unclear however, whether this will translate into votes and pose a significant challenge to Orban, a gifted politician riding high on an improving economy.

Communicating via Facebook and meeting up in out-of-the-way pubs to discuss tactics over cheap beer, the activists finally feel they are making progress.

"The demonstrations showed people that we can influence things and it's worth being politically more active," said Karoly Fuzessi, 30, a part-time web developer studying philosophy and library science.

"Maybe now the political class will realise it cannot do everything," agreed Reka Kinga Papp, 29, a journalist and prominent activist.

The proposed Internet tax was the latest in a string of Orban policies that have set off alarm bells about the direction of the central European former communist state of 10 million people.

Orban, armed with a two-thirds majority in parliament, is accused of passing a new constitution that weakened the judiciary, purging opposition members from the civil service and changing political rules to favour his Fidesz party.

Most recently non-governmental organisations distributing foreign aid have been raided for alleged financial irregularities.

The Internet levy was to have been modest, capped at 700 forints (€2.30, \$3) a month, and the government insisted it was merely to fill government coffers, not to limit Internet usage.

Critics wary of Orban's intentions

But critics feared that the real aim was to silence online criticism, where, thanks to Orban having brought mainstream media to heel, Hungarians have to go to find unfavourable coverage of the government.

There was international condemnation, too, with Neelie Kroes, until November 1 the EU's digital chief, tweeting that it was "a shame for users and a shame for the Hungarian government".

Last week's demonstrations attracted people from all walks of life - working-class teenagers, well-heeled middle class, pensioners hooked on Facebook - some protesting for the first time.

They had differing political views but were united not only by their distaste for Orban but also by their dissatisfaction with the mainstream opposition parties.

Some activists say they used to work with these parties, but were left disillusioned.

"Informally they (the opposition) offered help. But we have always said we cannot cooperate because the point is to represent everybody, because this Internet tax hurts everybody," said Gulyas, who used to work with the Socialist party.

But despite their tax victory, the activists have a long way to go before they threaten the government.

"If this discontent is not channelled politically, it could die out," Peter Kreko, analyst at the Political Capital Institute, told AFP.

Source: AFP, via I-Net Bridge

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