

Hungarian judges, court staff rally for judicial independence



BUDAPEST, Feb 22 (Reuters) - Thousands of Hungarian judges, court staff and supporters marched to the ministry of justice in Budapest on Saturday, demanding judicial independence, freedom of expression for judges and better pay.

The independence of Hungary's courts has been a contentious issue, causing a rift between Prime Minister Viktor Orban's nationalist government and the European Union.

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Judges began to express discontent in November when an agreement was signed between the government and the three main judicial representative bodies that tied salary rises to broad-based reforms.

Critics argued that the National Judicial Council, an independent entity with legal capacity and budgetary autonomy, was unduly pressured to sign the document hastily and in secrecy, without proper consultation.

"That was the first time that we thought that we should organise the judges, to show that we are not a chain of butchers who can be told what to do, but the third branch of government," said Judge Zoltan Endredy, one of the organisers.

Demonstrators also demanded more rights for judges to express their dissatisfaction and called for higher pay due to a high turnover of court staff in central Hungary and Budapest.

"Our first cause is to protect judicial independence," said Rita Kiszely, a judge attending the protest.

"We are not saying it has been eliminated. However, there are signs that it is under threat."

Kiszely also cited a lack of consultation with judicial bodies on key legislation, which she said had not taken place recently.

Earlier this month, the prime minister's chief of staff, Gergely Gulyas, said the constitution guaranteed the independence of Hungary's judiciary.

He said judges' average salary would reach nearly 2.3 million forints (\$5,974) by 2027, a 50% rise over two years while the salaries of court employees will be raised by 80-100%.

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