

World News Roundup

Iran

Public watch debates

Election theatrics push boundaries

DUBAI, May 11. (Agencies): From a former president disobeying the supreme leader to open discussion of a 1980s mass execution, Iran's presidential election is pushing the boundaries of what can be discussed in public and done online, a small but noticeable shift in the country's clerically overseen polls.

The push doesn't portend a dramatic change to the structure of the Islamic Republic, under which Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has the final say over all state matters and clerics determine who can run for office and what bills become law.

It does, however, show that the government's ability to clamp down on criticism is waning as Iranians turn to encrypted messaging applications like Telegram and internet chats ahead of the May 19 election.

"There's no doubt about the fact that the state has less control of the discursive realm. It's much easier for people to get information out," said Adnan Tabatabai, an Iran analyst based in Germany who is the CEO of the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient.

"The social media realm is no longer just the space for, let's say, young, reform-minded moderate figures and people. The conservative and hard-line elements have (done) their homework in that regard so they can use these channels as well."

The election appeared at first to be a walk for incumbent President Hassan Rouhani, whose moderate administration negotiated the 2015 deal with world powers to curb its nuclear activities. But while Iran has signed multi-billion-dollar deals with airplane manufacturers, the benefits of the lifting of sanctions have yet to reach most Iranians, fueling discontent.



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Surprise

Then came the surprise entry into the race of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had questioned the Holocaust, predicted Israel's demise and ramped up the nuclear program during his eight years in office. Authorities ultimately quashed his bid through the clerical screening that controls who can run. However, his short-lived campaign, in defiance of Khamenei's advice that he not run, challenged the supreme leader's authority.

As the candidate field firmed up, Iranians of all political stripes shared messages, photos and video across the mobile messaging application Telegram. The app's designers say some 40 million of its active users are in Iran, a nation of 80 million people. This year's vote marks the first presidential election held since the app swept across Iran.

Supporters of hard-line candidate Ebrahim Raisi circulated a video supposedly shot with passers-by on the streets of Tehran looking at a picture of a car bombing. All suggest the attack happened somewhere else until they turn over the picture to see it happened in Iran, allegedly at the hands of the exiled Mujahedeen-e-Khalq group.

The video seeks to defend Raisi, a favorite of Khamenei, and justify his alleged involvement in the 1988 mass execution of thousands of prisoners, many of them MEK members. It also represents a hard-line justification for the executions, one of the darkest moments of Iran's post-revolution history still not recognized by its government.

Rouhani supporters also have effectively used Telegram. After state television censored part of a Rouhani advertisement that included shouts supporting reformists detained after Iran's disputed 2009 presidential election, the unedited video quickly spread through the app.

In another break from precedent, Rouhani has increasingly criticized Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard, a hard-line paramilitary force answering only to Khamenei. During Friday's televised presidential debate, Rouhani pointed to the March 2016 launch of a ballistic missile bearing the words "Israel must be wiped out" in Hebrew, accusing the Guard of trying to sabotage the nuclear deal.

Rouhani kept up that criticism during a campaign stop Monday in Iran's western city of Hamedan. "Tell the extremists and those who use violence that your era is over," he said.

Analysts call the move risky.

Debates catches attention of public: As the date for the 12th Iranian Presidential election approaches, the public in the capital Tehran seems to be glued to television sets as they followed the latest debates amongst candidates eager to attain the senior state post.

While the debates go live, streets, public facilities, and all sorts of events become almost devoid of life due to the people's interest in who is displaying character, elegance, and leadership traits on screen amongst the candidates.

Broadcast

Speaking to KUNA, Mohammad Bakadeen said that live broadcast of the debates gave the people a hint of how the upcoming race is shaping up.

He affirmed that the debates brought people and families together in front of television screens to see who could outwit others on the way to the presidential seat. Bakadeen hoped that the results of the election would bring to the presidency a well-rounded person who is eager to serve the country and people.

On her part, Zainab Sha'bani said that issues connected with Iranian women was amongst the things she focused on during her follow up of the debates.

The debates on television brings the candidates' ideas and proposals directly to the people which is a positive thing especially when one considers how large and vast the country is, affirmed Sha'bani.

Iran Guards look beyond polls: Determined to protect a dominant security role and vast economic interests, Iran's Revolutionary Guards military force is quietly backing a hardliner in May 19 presidential polls, with an eye towards a bigger prize: the succession of the supreme leader.

President Hassan Rouhani, a relative moderate elected in 2013 in a landslide on promises to open up Iranian society and reduce its international isolation, is widely seen as the favourite to win a second term next week.

But the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and the Basij, a volunteer militia under the Guards' command, are taking steps to promote the candidacy of his main rival, hardline cleric Ebrahim Raisi.



Supporters of Iranian conservative presidential candidate, Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, hold his portrait during a campaign rally in the Iranian capital Tehran on May 11. Six candidates were selected last month by the conservative-controlled Guardian Council, which rejected more than 1,600 applicants. Election will take place on May 19. (AFP)

Mideast

Palestinian local polls Sat; clashes in W. Bank

Welby backs Trump's peace effort

JERUSALEM, May 11. (Agencies): The leader of the world's Anglicans on Wednesday backed US President Donald Trump's bid for fresh peace talks between Israel and Palestinians, saying "determined leadership" could tip the balance towards a resolution.

Speaking near the end of a 12-day trip to Israel, the Palestinian territories and Jordan, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said Trump would be "in my prayers" when he visits the region later this month and attempts to restart the moribund peace process.

"We have known from history in this region that determined leadership by the United States, together with patient working by lots of other people in the background, often unknown, can tip things very, very decisively," he told journalists in Jerusalem.

"When he comes here my prayer for him is he will be filled with determination and courage and given gifts of wisdom that will make a difference."

Arrive

Trump is expected to arrive in Israel on May 22 as part of his first foreign tour since his inauguration, though the date has not yet been officially confirmed.

The self-styled deal maker spoke last week in Washington with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas of his desire to seal the "toughest deal" of them all. Welby said his trip had been about learning and understanding the complexities of the situation in the Middle East.

He also sought to clarify comments that had caused some criticism in the Israeli media regarding dialogue with Hamas.

The Islamist movement, which runs Gaza, is considered a terrorist organization by Israel, and both sides reject direct negotiations.

Welby did not meet with Hamas officials during a trip to the Gaza Strip, but said there may be a time when it is necessary to speak to them directly. Also considered a terrorist group by

the United States and European Union, Hamas has been seeking to improve its reputation in the international community, including releasing a new policy document last week that somewhat eases its stance on Israel.

The Jewish state rejected the move by its long-term adversary, with which it has fought three wars since 2008, as window dressing.

"You look round some of the conflicts around the world in the past and you see people who have started in one place and have ended in a very, very different place and deeply committed to peace," Welby said Wednesday.

He added that any such agreement would be predicated on Hamas saying it is committed to non-violence and to a political process.

Welby said that militant groups "can over time — at the right time when the politicians decide, if they are convinced that it is authentic — be brought to a place where it is good to talk to them."

Justin Welby said on Wednesday as he was wrapping up a 10-day Holy Land trip that his key takeaway from the visit is "the overwhelming need for peace."

Palestinians vote in municipal elections on Saturday, but only in the West Bank and not the Gaza Strip, illustrating the persistent inability of rival movements Fatah and Hamas to overcome deep divisions.

Territories

The Israeli-occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip — the two territories that would in theory form an independent Palestinian state — have not participated in an election together since 2006.

Islamist movement Hamas has run Gaza while president Mahmud Abbas's more moderate Fatah has controlled the West Bank, since a near civil war erupted between the two sides a decade ago.

Their failure to reconcile is seen as a major obstacle to any settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Efforts last year to hold joint local elections failed as the two parties failed to bridge their differences.

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Clashes erupted in the occupied West Bank on Thursday between Israeli soldiers and hundreds of Palestinians protesting in support of hunger strikers in Israeli jails, leaving at least two people wounded.

Evacuated

The two Palestinians were hit by rubber bullets and evacuated on stretchers with bloodied legs, an AFP journalist reported.

Youths wearing hoods or masks threw stones at Israeli soldiers, who responded with rubber bullets and water canon containing foul-smelling liquid.

The clashes broke out at a checkpoint at the entrance to Ramallah and near the Israeli settlement of Beit El, the site of regular demonstrations against the occupation.

The protest was called in support of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners on hunger strike in Israeli jails since April 17.

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Hamas has arrested the suspected murderer of one of its key military commanders in Gaza, the Palestinian Islamist movement's leader said Thursday, while maintaining Israel was behind the March assassination.

"We announce that the killer and criminal that carried out the orders of the officers of the Zionist security services is in the hands of the (Hamas) security services," Ismail Haniya told journalists in the Gaza Strip, referring to Israel.

"He has confessed to the crime." No details were provided on the suspect's identity, though Hamas has previously suggested Palestinian collaborators worked with Israel on the assassination.



A Palestinian man gestures towards Israeli soldiers as he tries to extinguish the fire in an olive field on the border with the Jewish outpost of Kivat Ronain on May 10, near the village of Burin, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. (AFP)



Gulen



Ben Ali

Mideast

Turkey slams Germany move: Turkey on Thursday condemned Germany for granting political asylum to numerous military personnel and their families with alleged links to last year's failed coup, saying the move risked harming relations.

Germany gave positive responses to the asylum petitions of the Turkish nationals holding diplomatic passports, the Sueddeutsche Zeitung daily and public broadcasters WDR and NDR reported. The reports were not officially confirmed by authorities.

Since the unsuccessful coup attempt in July last year, dozens of diplomats, judges, and high-ranking Turkish officials have sought asylum in Germany as Ankara presses ahead with a vast crackdown on alleged supporters of Fethullah Gulen, the US-based preacher who Ankara blames for the coup.

German media reported that 414 military personnel, diplomats, judges and other high-ranking Turkish officials have sought political asylum in Germany. That number also includes family members. (AFP)

Tunisian sets himself on fire: Tunisian police fired tear gas to break up rioting by hundreds of protesters who took to the streets after a fruit seller set himself on fire when police stopped him working, local residents said.

In an incident similar to the self-immolation in 2011 that sparked the uprising that toppled autocrat Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, the street vendor in a small town west of the capital poured gasoline over himself and set it ablaze. A crowd of young men in Tebourba, about 35 kms (22 miles) from Tunis, then threw rocks at police.

"Hundreds of angry youths have clashed with police who have been firing tear gas," said Anis Mabrouki, a local resident.

The vendor was being treated for his injuries in hospital. (RTRS)

Hamas burns drug stash: Gaza's militant Islamic Hamas rulers have burned a large stash of seized narcotics and sentenced two dealers to death as part of their campaign against drugs.

Thursday marked the second time Hamas has delivered death sentences for drug dealing since the group seized power

in Gaza in 2007.

Hamas' Interior Ministry says some 1,130 bars of hashish and 467,000 pills that had been seized since the beginning of the year were destroyed.

Black plumes of smoke rose after the drugs were set on fire.

Islam forbids the consumption of alcohol

and illicit drugs. (AP)

Tunis poll chief quits: Tunisia's President Beji Caid Essebsi on Wednesday criticised the surprise resignation of the country's electoral chief just months before it is due to hold its first post-revolution



A picture from the Palestinian village of Deir Ibzi, west of Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, shows a person watering plants with the Jewish settlement of Dolev seen in the background. (AFP)

municipal elections.

Chafik Sarsar resigned on Tuesday, implying he was no longer able to work "independently and impartially" towards holding "free and transparent elections".

The president said Sarsar told him he was resigning in a phone call.

"I said 'Yes, I saw it on television... You could at least have asked me beforehand'," Essebsi said in a speech in Tunis, with Sarsar in the audience.

"Whatever your reasons, they are not above Tunisia's greatest problems... We want to put Tunisia's highest interest before all others," he said. (AFP)

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Egyptian invents 'mini car': In his workshop near Cairo's pyramids, Ahmed Saeed Omar has manufactured a mini four-wheeled vehicle that he hopes will fill a gap in the market.

Omar's "mini car", a rectangular vehicle made of a solid steel body which seats up to six people, is cheaper than the widely-used imported auto rickshaw — not much more than a covered three-wheel scooter with a passenger bench — because it is almost entirely locally produced.

Prices of imported products have soared since Egypt devalued its currency in November as part of measures to stimulate the economy. A rickshaw can cost around 38,000 Egyptian pounds (\$2,105) and has a 175 horse-power engine, while Omar's mini car costs 34,000 pounds and has 300 horse-power engine. (RTRS)