

World News Roundup

India

'Referendum on Modi'

Tight security as Indians vote in 7th & final phase

KOLKATA, India, May 19. (Agencies): Indians voted Sunday in the seventh and final phase of a grueling national election that lasted more than five weeks, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party seeks to govern for another five years.

The election is seen as a referendum on Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party. The BJP's main opposition is the Congress party, led by Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that has produced three prime ministers.

Vote counting begins on Thursday, and the election result will likely be known the same day.

The voting Sunday covered Modi's constituency of Varanasi, a holy Hindu city where he was elected in 2014 with an impressive margin of over 200,000 votes. Modi spent Saturday night at Kedarnath, a temple of the Hindu god Shiva nestled in the Himalayas in northern India.

The final election round included 59 constituencies in eight states. Up for grabs were 13 seats in Punjab and an equal number in Uttar Pradesh, eight each in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, nine in West Bengal, four in Himachal Pradesh and three in Jharkhand and Chandigarh.

In Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, voters lined up outside polling stations early Sunday morning to avoid the scorching heat, with temperatures reaching up to 38°C (100°F). Armed security officials stood guard in and outside the centers amid fear of violence.

Around 900 million Indians are eligible to vote in the seven-phase election, with vote counting to begin on Thursday.

The gruelling, 39-day poll began in the wake of aerial clashes and escalated tensions with neighbouring Pakistan, which Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) used to focus its campaign on national security.

The main opposition Congress party and other regional blocs concentrated on the government's economic mismanagement and inability to create jobs in their attempt to win voters.

Clashes

However, the campaign turned increasingly personal and vitriolic in the final stages and clashes between rival groups marred polling in West Bengal.

India's election commission suspended campaigning on Wednesday, a day early, after violence in the state's capital, Kolkata.

Security was tight around voting stations in Kolkata and surrounding areas where people will cast their vote on Sunday. Around 57,000 policemen have been deployed and more than 400 quick response teams are on standby in case of any trouble, according to the chief electoral officer in Kolkata.

While the election, which began April 11, was largely peaceful, West Bengal, located in eastern India, was an exception. Modi is challenged there by the state's chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, who heads the more inclusive Trinamool Congress party and is eyeing a chance to go to New Delhi as the opposition's candidate for prime minister.

Modi visited West Bengal 17 times in an effort to make inroads with his Hindu nationalist agenda, provoking sporadic violence and prompting the Election Commission to cut off campaigning there.

On Sunday, Nirmala Sitharaman, a BJP leader and the country's defense minister, accused Banerjee's supporters of attacking her party members and preventing them from voting at several places in six of the nine constituencies in West Bengal. She did not provide details.

Prodeep Chakrabarty, a retired teacher in Kolkata, said Modi's BJP was desperate to win some seats against Banerjee's influential regional party.

"People are divided for many reasons. We have to wait for a final outcome to see who people are voting for. Things are not predictable like before," he said.

Minorities in India, especially Muslims, who comprise about 14 percent of the country's 1.3 billion people, criticize Modi for his Hindu nationalist agenda. Modi's party backed a bill that would make it easier to deport millions of Bangladeshis who have migrated to India since Bangladesh's independence in 1971. The bill, however, eases a path to citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Parsees and Jains — non-Muslims — who came from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan over decades.

Voters were also up early Sunday in Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh state, where election workers arranged for drinking water, shade and fans to cool them down.

"I straightaway came from my morning walk to cast my vote and was surprised to see enthusiasm among the voters," said Ramesh Kumar Singh, who was among the first to vote. "There were long queues of people waiting patiently to cast their votes, which is a good sign for democracy."

During the election campaign, Modi played up the threat of Pakistan, India's Muslim-majority neighbor and archrival, especially after the suicide bombing of a paramilitary convoy in Kashmir on Feb 14 that killed 40 Indian soldiers.

Opposition

Congress and other opposition parties have challenged Modi over a high unemployment rate of 6.1% and farmers' distress aggravated by low crop prices.

Some of Modi's boldest policy steps, such as the demonetization of high currency notes to curb black-market money, proved to be economically damaging. A haphazard implementation of "one nation, one tax" — a goods and services tax — also hit small and medium businesses.

Voter turnout in the first six rounds was approximately 66%, the Election Commission said, up from 58% in the last national vote in 2014.

Pre-election media polls indicate that no party is likely to win anything close to a majority in Parliament, which has 543 seats. The BJP, which won a majority of 282 seats in 2014, may need some regional parties as allies to stay in power.

A Congress-led government would require a major electoral upset.

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has one unwanted lead in this month's general election race — according to data from an electoral watchdog it is fielding the most candidates among the major parties who are facing criminal charges. Its main rival, Congress, is just a step behind.

Election laws allow such candidates to run so long as they have not been convicted, on grounds both of fairness and because India's criminal justice system moves so slowly that trials can take years, or even decades, to be resolved.

Still, the number of such candidates accused of offences ranging from murder to rioting has been rising with each election.



Indian women look for their names in the voting list at a polling station during the seventh and final phase of national elections on the outskirts of Varanasi, India on May 19. Indians voted in the seventh and final phase of national elections, wrapping up a 6-week-long grueling campaign season with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party seeking re-election for another five years. Counting of votes is scheduled for May 23. (AP)

Australia

Opposition leader Shorten concedes defeat

Ruling coalition gets surprise 3rd term

CANBERRA, May 19. (AP): Australia's ruling conservative coalition won a surprise victory in the country's general election on Saturday, defying opinion polls that had tipped the center-left opposition party to oust it from power and promising an end to the revolving door of national leaders.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison compared his Liberal Party's victory for a third three-year term to the births of his daughters, Abbey, 11, and Lily, 9, who were conceived naturally after 14 years of in vitro fertilization had failed. His wife, Jenny Morrison, suffered endometriosis.

"I have always believed in miracles," Morrison, 51, told a jubilant Sydney crowd as he claimed victory.

"I'm standing with the three biggest miracles in my life here tonight, and tonight we've been delivered another one," he said, embraced by his wife and daughters.

Opposition leader Bill Shorten had earlier conceded defeat as the coalition came close to a majority in the 151-seat House of Representatives, where parties need a majority to form a government. Vote counting was to continue on Sunday.

"I'm disappointed for people who depend upon Labor, but I'm glad that we argued what was right, not what was easy," Shorten told his supporters.

Shorten would have become Australia's sixth prime minister in as many years. He said he would no longer lead Labor after six years at the helm.

The tight race raised the prospect of the coalition forming a minority government. The conservatives became a rare minority government after they dumped Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister for Morrison in an internal power struggle last August. The government then lost two seats and its single-seat majority as part of the bloodletting that followed.

An unpopular single-term Labor government that was voted out in 2013

had been the only previous minority government since World War II.

Opinion polls prior to Saturday's election had suggested that the coalition would lose and that Morrison would have had one of the shortest tenures as prime minister in the 118-year history of the Australian federation.

Morrison had focused his campaigning on polling that showed while Labor was more popular than the government, the prime minister was more popular than Shorten.

There was so much public confidence of a Labor victory that Australian online bookmaker Sportsbet paid out 1.3 million Australian dollars (\$900,000) to bettors who backed Labor two days before the election. Sportsbet said 70% of wagers had been placed on Labor at odds of \$1.16.

Accepted

Another betting agency, Ladbrokes, said it had accepted a record AU\$1 million wager on Labor.

Shorten, who campaigned heavily on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, said Saturday morning that he was confident Labor would win, but Morrison would not be drawn on a prediction.

Morrison is the conservatives' third prime minister since they were elected in 2013.

Tony Abbott, who became the first of those three prime ministers in the 2013 election, conceded defeat in the Sydney seat he has held since 1994.

Polling suggests climate change was a major issue in that seat for voters, who instead elected an independent candidate, Zali Steggall. As prime minister in 2014, Abbott repealed a carbon tax introduced by a Labor government. Abbott was replaced by Turnbull the next year because of poor opinion polling, but he remained a government lawmaker.

A maverick senator who blamed the slaughter of 51 worshippers in two New Zealand mosques on the coun-

try's immigration policies also lost his bid for election.

Fraser Anning was the target of widespread condemnation for railing against Muslim immigration within hours of the mass shootings in the New Zealand city of Christchurch in March. He faced more criticism later for physically striking a teenage protester who cracked a raw egg on his head and was censured by the Senate.

Senior Labor lawmaker Chris Bowen said his party may have suffered from what he conceded was an unusual strategy of pushing a detailed policy agenda through the election campaign.

Morrison began the day Saturday by campaigning in the island state of Tasmania, where the Liberals appeared to have gained two Labor-held seats. He then flew 900 kilometers (560 miles) home to Sydney to vote and to campaign in Sydney seats.

Shorten campaigned hard on more ambitious targets to reduce Australia's greenhouse gas emissions.

The government has committed Australia to reduce its emissions by 26% to 28% below 2005 levels by 2030. Labor has promised a 45% reduction in the same time frame.

Shorten, a 52-year-old former labor union leader, has also promised a range of reforms, including the government paying all of a patients' costs for cancer treatment and a reduction of tax breaks for landlords.

Morrison, a former tourism marketer, promised lower taxes and better economic management than Labor.

Both major parties promised that whoever won the election would remain prime minister until he next faces the voters' judgment. The parties have changed their rules to make the process of lawmakers replacing a prime minister more difficult.

During Labor's last six years in office, the party replaced Prime Minister Kevin Rudd with his deputy Julia Gillard, then dumped her for Rudd.



A man wears 'europe-glasses' during a protest rally in Cologne, Germany on May 19. People across Europe attend demonstrations under the slogan 'A Europe for All — Your Voice Against Nationalism'. (AP)



Salvini



Merkel

Europe

'Decree violates migrants' rights':

UN human rights investigators have told Italy that a proposed decree formalizing the closure of Italian ports to aid groups that rescue migrants at sea violates international law.

In a letter to Italy's government, the investigators said the decree appears to be "yet another political attempt to criminalize search and rescue operations" that "further intensifies the climate of hostility and xenophobia against migrants."

Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, a hard-line populist, has proposed the decree ahead of the European Parliament elections this week, where nationalist, anti-migrant parties are hoping to make strong gains.

The letter from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights says the measures would violate migrants' human rights, which are enshrined in UN conventions. It said Italy is obliged to rescue migrants in distress and cannot impede others from doing so. (AP)

Austria eyes September election:

Austria's president on Sunday recommended a new election be held in early September, saying he wanted to restore trust in the government after a video scandal led to the resignation of the vice-chancellor.

Chancellor Sebastian Kurz pulled the plug on the coalition and called for a snap election on Saturday after his deputy, Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of the far-right Freedom Party, quit over a video showed him discussing fixing state contracts in return for favours.

It is most important that Austrians are given the chance of a new start to rebuild trust in its government, President Alexander van der Bellen said in a statement at his Hofburg residence in Vienna.

"This new beginning should take place quickly, as quickly as the provisions of the Federal Constitution permit, so I plead for elections ... in September, if possible at the beginning of September," the president said. Strache has described the video sting as a "targeted political assassination" and said it never led to any money changing hands. He insisted the only crime that took place was illegally videotaping a private dinner party.

Van der Bellen and Kurz said at their joint news conference that stability was a main priority for them for the coming months.

Kurz repeated that he saw the snap elections as the only way to solve the crisis. "The new elections were a necessity, not a wish," he said.

The make up of a caretaker government remained unclear a day after the 18-month-

old coalition of conservatives and the far right collapsed. (RTRS)

Merkel slams far-right parties:

German Chancellor Angela Merkel called on Saturday for Europe to push back against far-right parties, saying populist movements wanted to destroy core European values such as fighting corruption and protecting minorities.

Merkel made the remarks when asked about a scandal engulfing Austria's far-right

Freedom Party, whose leader Heinz-Christian Strache quit on Saturday as government vice-chancellor after he was videoed offering state contracts in exchange for political support.

"We're having to deal with populist movements that in many areas are contemptuous of these values, who want to destroy the Europe of our values. We have to stand up to this decisively," said Merkel, who has kept a low-profile during campaigning for next week's EU parliamentary election.

"What falls under this is that minorities

are not protected, that basic human rights are called into question and that corruption plays a role in politics," she added after meeting Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic in Zagreb.

Merkel has left the most vocal election campaigning to fellow countryman Manfred Weber, the top conservative candidate in the May 23-26 election.

Weber, also speaking in Zagreb, said the Austrian scandal vindicated his intention not to rely on votes from far-right parties in his bid for EU commission president.

"The far right and populists are ready to sell their patriotism and the values of their country for their gains," he said, referring to the affair. (RTRS)

2 Malta soldiers charged:

Two Maltese soldiers have pleaded not guilty to charges they participated in a racially-motivated, fatal drive-by shooting of a migrant from Ivory Coast.

The two men, Lorin Scicluna and Francesco Fenech, were also charged Sunday with the April 6 attempted murder of two other men from Guinea and Gambia, who were seriously injured in the attack. The death of Ivorian Lassana Cisse was believed to be Malta's first-ever racially motivated attack.

The charges, which include racial hatred and committing a racially motivated crime, carry a maximum of life in prison.

Migration is a key political issue for the Mediterranean island nation, particularly ahead of European Parliament elections this week. Maltese political leaders and Catholic Church officials have been speaking out against growing hate speech against migrants, particularly on social media. (AP)



Buddhists fly lanterns during a celebration commemorating Vesak Day which marks the birth, death and enlightenment of Buddha at Borobudur Temple in Magelang, Central Java, Indonesia on May 19. (AP)