

News

## Catalan leader urges 'unity' as...

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Puigdemont said Friday he was ready to run as a candidate in the poll - which he can do even if detained - and yesterday called for separatist parties to form a united front. In a tweet, he referred to an online petition calling for the creation of a combined independent candidate list, which by lunchtime yesterday had received nearly 35,000 signatures. During the last regional election in Sept 2015, Puigdemont's conservative PdeCat and the far-left ERC party stood together in a "Together for Yes" coalition. But there have been growing tensions between the two allies over strategy and it is not clear if they will stand together again.

Separatist parties have a slim majority of 72 seats in the 135-seat parliament, and opinion polls suggest they might again win a majority in the December poll. "It's absolutely indispensable that we have a joint strategy to battle the repression," Sergi Sabria, a spokesman for the separatist ERC party, told Catalunya Radio, in a sign the two main parties might work together. Parties that wish to stand together in a coalition in the polls must announce this by Nov 7.

Whether Puigdemont and his colleagues in Brussels, Maria Serret Aleu, Antoni Comin Oliveres, Luis Puig Gordi and Clara Ponsati Obiols, will be able to take part in the election is an open question. The Belgian justice ministry said there are "some situations" where European arrest warrants can be refused, but added: "If the decision is to execute the (warrant), the person is in principle surrendered to the authorities of the issuing state within 10 days following the decision."

Puigdemont has repeatedly called on the international community to back him, but apart from Scotland's separatist First Minister Nicola Sturgeon criticizing the "jailing of political opponents", there are



Carles Puigdemont

no signs that other countries will recognize the independence move. Spain's allies in Europe have voiced steadfast support for the nation's unity and said they back the independence of the judiciary.

The 7.5 million people of Catalonia, which until this past week had considerable autonomy, are fiercely proud of their language and culture but are also deeply divided about the wisdom of independence. Even though Catalonia is one of Spain's wealthiest regions, Spain's central bank has warned of a possible recession and unemployment in the region rose strongly in October. Despite the negative economic headwinds, Peter Ceretti at the Economist Intelligence Unit said pro-independence parties might win the December election, as the jailed ministers could deliver an "important propaganda" boost. — AFP

Arabia and Iran and called for intensifying diplomatic efforts to solve the feud. "Lebanon is too small and vulnerable to bear the economic and political burden that comes with this resignation," he said on social media. "I will continue to call for dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran."

Even as he resigned, Hariri warned his foes: "Our nation will rise just as it did before and the hands that want to harm it will be cut." "Hariri's resignation was done with planning by Donald Trump, the president of America, and Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, to destabilize the situation in Lebanon and the region," said Hussein Sheikh Al-Islam, adviser to Iran's supreme leader, in remarks to a state broadcaster. Saudi Arabia's influential Gulf Affairs Minister Thamer Al-Sabhan echoed the language of the Lebanese politician saying in a tweet: "The hands of treachery and aggression must be cut off."

Earlier last week, Sabhan sharply criticized Hezbollah, calling for its "toppling" and promising "astounding developments" in the coming days during an interview with the Lebanese TV station MTV. Sabhan met with Hariri in Saudi Arabia when the now resigned prime minister was visiting earlier this week. Hariri abruptly returned to the kingdom later Friday before his bombshell announcement yesterday. In tweets after meeting Hariri, Sabhan described it as "long and fruitful meeting" that resulted in agreements over many issues that concern the Lebanese. "What's coming is better, God willing," Sabhan tweeted on Tuesday. In a series of tweets, Sabhan criticized the Lebanese government for tolerating Hezbollah's criticism of the kingdom. He earlier said that those who cooperate with Hezbollah must be "punished".

Lebanese political analyst Hilal Khashan argued that Saudi Arabia had been piling the pressure on its protegee lately and "summoned" him to Riyadh. He said Hariri's move could start "a cold war in Lebanon that could escalate into a civil war" or even a regional offensive on Hezbollah. It is unclear who could replace Hariri at this stage. Under a power-sharing system that helped end Lebanon's 15-year civil war, the president must be a Christian, the prime minister a Sunni and the speaker a Shiite. — Agencies

## Scarred by Trump, challengers eyeing...

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In an October New Hampshire poll of 2020 Democratic primaries, voters put Sanders first. Popular former vice president Joe Biden, a crucial party bridge to white working-class voters, came second, and if there is a veteran Democrat waiting in the wings, it could be him. He has acknowledged that his son's death from cancer in 2015 was the sole reason he did not pursue the nomination last year. Sanders would be 79 on election day, and Biden 77.

### Rebels

Firebrand Senator Elizabeth Warren, 68, would have a tangible base of support should she run. Like Sanders, she is among the party's popular, sharp-tongued liberals. But her politics align with Sanders - she backs his universal healthcare plan. Senator Sherrod Brown is a populist flying under the radar, but he has firm progressive credentials. Being from the crucial state of Ohio, he could help Democrats win back support in the Rust Belt.

### Up-and-comers

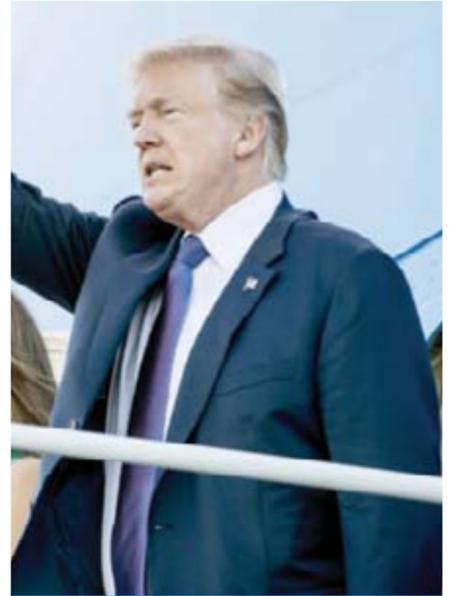
Senator Cory Booker is already a star, but there is room to grow on the national stage. A gifted speaker and champion of the poor, the youthful African-American is hailed as Obama's heir. Kamala Harris is the new charismatic US senator from California, a fervent supporter of immigrant and civil rights who has already courted major donors at fundraisers and meet-and-greets. Also in this category: Senators Chris Murphy of Connecticut and Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and Montana Governor Steve Bullock.

### Celebrities

If Democrats want to fight Trump fire with fire, billionaire TV icon Oprah Winfrey is their likeliest option. She has extraordinarily deep pockets and massive name recognition. Business and entertainment mogul Mark Cuban and wealthy environmental activist Tom Steyer are also mulling runs.

### Long-shots

These are not household names, but that may change. Congressman John Delaney of Maryland is the first Democrat to declare his 2020 candidacy. As an economic centrist with hardscrabble roots who made millions start-



US President Donald Trump

ing successful businesses, he could appeal to frustrated Trumpists. Massachusetts congressman Seth Moulton is a military veteran with a Harvard business degree, and Ohio's Tim Ryan raised his profile last year by challenging Nancy Pelosi for her House leadership job. Americans might want such newcomers to carry the baton, said Matt Paul, who ran Clinton's 2016 campaign in Iowa. "I think there will be pressure and interest in a new face, a new story, someone who... energizes and builds out this base again," he said.

### And Republicans?

Internal revolts are rarely successful, but Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party has all but invited a 2020 challenge. Senators Jeff Flake and Bob Corker have announced they are not seeking re-election, freeing them up to criticize the president and possibly mount insurgent campaigns. Ohio Governor John Kasich, a 2016 candidate, has not ruled out a run. Other 2016 holdovers to watch: Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio. — AFP

## Lebanon PM Hariri resigns, attacks...

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It enjoys broad support from Iran and is the only Lebanese party to have kept its weapons after the 1975-1990 civil war.

Hezbollah's arsenal has since grown exponentially and now outstrips that of the nation's own armed forces. The group claims it is the only credible rampart against neighboring Israel, and its refusal to disarm is the main political crux in Lebanon. Hezbollah members have been accused over the 2005 assassination in a massive car bomb blast of Rafik Hariri, the dominant figure in Lebanon's post-war political landscape. He made his fortune in Saudi Arabia, where his son Saad was born.

Saudi Arabia is Iran's main regional rival, and the two powers' tussle for influence has played out in ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. The office of Lebanese President Michel Aoun, a veteran Christian leader allied to Hezbollah, issued a statement saying it was waiting for Hariri's return to Lebanon "to enquire about the circumstances of his decision and decide on the next steps". Aoun's office said Hariri had called him from "outside Lebanon" to inform him of his resignation.

Hariri flew to Saudi Arabia on Friday after a meeting in Beirut with Ali Akbar Velayati, the top adviser to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Afterwards, Velayati described Hariri's coalition as "a victory" and "great success". Hariri said in his speech that the political climate in Lebanon was reminiscent of that which prevailed before his father was killed. The Feb 2005 assassination triggered political upheaval that led to Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon.

Walid Jumblatt, one of Lebanon's political heavyweights and the country's most prominent Druze leader, said Hariri's resignation could adversely affect a country already under huge strain. He argued it was the latest manifestation of the tug-of-war between Saudi

## Spacey dumped by Netflix, police...

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"Netflix will not be involved with any further production of 'House of Cards' that includes Kevin Spacey," a spokesperson said. The channel said it would work with the show's production company, MRC, "to evaluate our path forward as it relates to the show". Eight current or former employees on the award-winning "House of Cards" told CNN that Spacey turned the set into a "toxic" environment through a pattern of sexual harassment of younger, male crew members.

In London, police said that they had opened an investigation into an allegation of sexual assault. Officers do not publicly identify the subject of an inquiry unless they are charged, but British media said it was Spacey. Since the allegations first surfaced Sunday, Spacey has made no comment other than declaring he was "beyond horrified" by the first allegation dating back 31 years, which he claimed not to remember.

It remains unclear if "House of Cards" can now go ahead in any form. Actor Anthony Rapp opened the floodgates by saying the actor tried to "seduce" him and lay on top of him when he was 14 years old at Spacey's New York apartment 31 years ago. A 48-year-old East Coast artist told Vulture he began a sexual relationship with Spacey when he was 14 that ended when he was 15 after the actor, then 24, allegedly tried

to rape him. Mexican actor Roberto Cavazos was another who claimed he fended off "unpleasant" advances while at The Old Vic, the London theater where Spacey was artistic director from 2003-2015.

Weinstein, once one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, and Spacey are the most high-profile scalps in a month-long torrent of allegations bringing down like dominoes male power players from the worlds of politics, finance, entertainment and journalism. Some 100 women have since early October accused Weinstein, a father of five, of sexual misconduct ranging from harassment to rape, sparking police investigations in London, Los Angeles and New York.

On Friday, New York police confirmed that officers were gathering evidence for a possible arrest warrant in connection with Weinstein's alleged double rape of "Boardwalk Empire" actress Paz de la Huerta at her New York apartment in late 2010. "She put forth a credible and detailed narrative to us," NYPD Chief of Detectives Robert Boyce told reporters. The former producer, his career in tatters, denies any non-consensual relations.

"If this person was still in New York and it was recent, we would go right away and make the arrest, no doubt. But we're talking about a seven-year-old case and we have to move forward in gathering evidence first," said Boyce. "We have an actual case here," he added. "Mr Weinstein is out of state. We would need an arrest warrant to arrest him. So right now we're gathering our evidence. We continue to do so. Every day." The Manhattan district attorney's office confirmed it had assigned a senior sex crimes prosecutor to the case. — AFP

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