

International

# From dead voters to blackouts: Malaysia braces for 'filthy' poll

## Malaysian activists gear up to battle widespread cheating

**KUALA LUMPUR:** "Phantom" voters, electoral roll tampering, mysterious power blackouts during recounts—Malaysian activists are gearing up to battle widespread cheating at what they fear will be the dirtiest election in the country's history. Prime Minister Najib Razak is facing a tough test at the May 9 poll due to a corruption scandal surrounding state fund IMDB, discontent over rising living costs, and a challenge from veteran ex-leader Mahathir Mohamad.

While vote-rigging has plagued previous Malaysian elections, observers fear the high stakes mean that cheating by the long-ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition will be more rampant than ever before. In response, opposition and civil society groups are training poll monitors to prevent fraud, while leading electoral reform group Bersih has set up an online platform to report instances of alleged rigging.

"This election is not just dirty, it is filthy," Bridget Welsh, a Malaysia expert from John Cabot University, told AFP. "Najib's insecurity is delegitimizing the electoral process." Even before a single ballot has been cast, Bersih lamented the poll had descended into an "open auction with votes for sale" due to local leaders—mainly from BN but also the opposition—giving out cash and gifts such as TVs and food hampers. Concerns have been raised about the electoral roll, with Bersih saying that it had so far received over 80 complaints from the public. These include reports of so-called "phantom" voters, such as people who have died but still appear on the list, or people whose names have appeared without them registering.

At the last election in 2013, when BN lost the popular vote for the first time since Malaysia gained independ-

ence from Britain in 1957, there were numerous allegations of cheating. There were reports of "dubious" voters including foreigners being flown into key constituencies in Malaysia to vote for BN. Supposedly indelible ink, used in a Malaysian general election for the first time and touted by the government as a guarantee against multiple voting, was found to wash easily off people's fingers. Sudden electricity blackouts at polling centers were also experienced during vote recounts, fuelling suspicions of ballot tampering—something the ruling coalition denied.

No contest, but a beating  
In the hope of stemming what they expect to be a tsunami of cheating, Bersih and other groups are training volunteers to monitor voting on polling day. At a recent session in a Kuala Lumpur hall, about 100 volunteers were being given pointers by Invoke, a think-tank linked to opposition group the People's Justice Party. They gathered around trainers who were pretending to be polling agents and teaching them how to check for suspicious activity.

"We're doing this to ensure nothing funny happens on polling day," Invoke official Matthew Lai told AFP. "There are too many avenues to cheat." Despite their efforts, Bersih—which led massive protests against Najib at the height of the IMDB scandal—is not confident that reports of alleged violations will be taken seriously, and says complaints made at the last election were not. There are some instances of alleged poll rigging that it is already too late to fight. In March the government pushed a redrawing of electoral boundaries through parliament, in a move that critics say unfairly favors the ruling coalition by creating constituencies dominated by their Muslim Malay supporters.



**PEKAN, Malaysia:** Candidates wait after handing over election documents during the nomination day ahead of the country's 14th general election in Pekan. "Phantom" voters, electoral roll tampering, mysterious power blackouts during recounts—Malaysian activists are gearing up to battle widespread cheating at what they fear will be the dirtiest election in the country's history. —AFP

### 'Even opposition can win'

BN however insists that Malaysian elections are conducted fairly. "There's no such thing as cheating here... In our system, even the opposition can win," Information Minister Salleh Said Keruak told AFP. Najib is tipped to retain power at the election. Critics say this will be partly due to vote rigging but admit other factors such as a robust domestic economy will help him. Still the presence of 92-year-old Mahathir, who is heading the opposition, has made life more difficult for him.

Mahathir came out of retirement to take on Najib, his former protegee, in response to the IMDB scandal, which allegedly saw billions looted from the state fund in a campaign of fraud and money-laundering. Najib and IMDB deny any wrongdoing. While Mahathir has predicted enormous cheating, critics say this is rich coming from a man who faced numerous accusations of fraud at polls during his own time in office. However, Welsh from John Cabot University said that vote-rigging has become more serious under Najib: "Elections are supposed to be a contest—Najib wants it to be a beating." —AFP



### Prime Minister Najib is facing a tough test

## Thrifty at 50: Pakistan keeps ageing Mirages flying

**KAMRA:** The sprawling complex at Kamra, west of Islamabad, reverberates at the thundering take-off of a Mirage Rose-1, the latest ageing fighter jet to have been gutted and reassembled by the Pakistani Air Force. Fifty years after Pakistan bought its first Mirages, many planes in the venerable fleet are still being patched up, overhauled and upgraded for use in combat, years after conventional wisdom dictates they should be grounded. That includes one of the first two planes originally purchased from France's Dassault in 1967, which was in a hangar at Kamra after its record fifth overhaul when AFP visited recently.

The techniques they have developed are reminiscent of—but far more high-tech and lethal than—the improvised methods used to keep classic American cars running on the streets of Havana. "We have achieved such a capability that our experts can integrate any latest system with the ageing Mirages," says Air Commodore Salman M Farooqi, deputy managing director of the Mirage Rebuild Factory (MRF) at the Kamra complex.

Pakistan bought its first Mirages to diversify its fleet, which in the late 1960s largely consisted of US-built planes: F-104 Starfighters, T-37 Tweet Birds and F-86 Sabres. The Mirage became a popular choice, with the Air Force buying 17 different variants in later years, eventually owning the second-highest number of the fighter jets after France. They performed bombing missions during Pakistan's failed war with India in 1971 — one of the shortest conflicts in history, lasting just 13 days and leading to the creation of Bangladesh.

But Mirages flew on, also carrying out reconnaissance missions in India, and intercepting and shooting down Soviet and Afghan planes that violated Pakistani



**KAMRA, Pakistan:** A Mirage aircraft of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) takes off at the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex after an overhaul at the Mirage Rebuild Factory (MRF) in Kamra, west of the capital Islamabad. —AFP

airspace during the Soviet war. Usually the jet has two or three life cycles, each spanning around 12 years. But overhauling them abroad was expensive for Pakistan, a developing country whose budget is already disproportionately tilted towards its military and which has historically received billions in military assistance from countries such as the US. So, with the help of experts from Dassault, the air force decided if you want something done for the right price, you've got to do it yourself.

### Makeover

The Mirage Rebuild Factory was established at the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) in 1978, and in the years since has saved "billions" of dollars for Pakistan, according to Group Captain Muhammad Farooq, in charge of one of the maintenance hangars—though he said the exact figure was difficult to pin down.

The planes take some seven weeks to be overhauled and repainted, he said, adding that usually the MRF has the capacity for more than a dozen planes a year. Its calendar for the next decade or so is already

booked up. At least eight different Mirage variants, including the Mirage 5-EF, Mirage III-DP and Mirage-III Rose-1, were in one of the maintenance hangars when AFP visited. Engineers and technicians were dismantling cockpit instrument panels and landing gear while undertaking a "non-destructive inspection", essentially an X-ray to detect faults in the wings and airframe.

Dozens of engines awaiting overhaul were piled in one hangar. Even planes that had suffered accidents such as fires breaking out have been patched back together at the facility. Pakistan has also been buying up discarded Mirages from other countries to bring through the facility, said retired Air Marshal Shahid Lateef. The most important technological improvement, developed with the help of South Africa, is the ability to integrate air-to-air refueling, Farooqi said. The "identification of friend and foe" (IFF) system, which detects when a Mirage has been locked on to by the system of another plane, was also a key development, he said. —AFP

## Outrage as WWII sex slave memorial removed in Manila

**MANILA:** Advocacy groups voiced outrage yesterday after a memorial to women forced to work as sex slaves to Japanese soldiers during World War II was taken down in Manila. City authorities said the bronze sculpture of a blindfolded woman, which was on a bypassed promenade in the Philippine capital, was removed Friday to make way for a drainage and footbridge project. However, advocacy groups for the memory of so-called "comfort women" wondered whether the Philippine government had yielded to Japanese displeasure over the memorial.

While Japan occupied the Philippines during the war, it is now one of the Philippines' top investors, trading partners and aid donors. After the statue was installed in January, some two kilometers from the Japanese embassy, Tokyo said the move was "very unfortunate". "The Japanese government is working hard... they also wanted to get rid of a similar statue in New Jersey," said Rechilda Extremadura, executive director of Lila Pilipina, an organi-

zation of comfort women survivors and advocates. "This is a desecration of Filipino women's dignity as it casts a foul insult on hundreds of Filipina sex slaves victimized under the Japanese occupation," women's group Gabriela said.

Manila's public works department could not be reached for comment and the Japanese embassy in the Philippines did not immediately respond to an email. Historians say up to 200,000 women, mostly from Korea but also other parts of Asia including the Philippines and China, were forced to work in wartime military brothels for Japanese invasion troops. The number of Philippine women involved is believed to number in the hundreds. Activists have in recent years set up dozens of statues in public venues around the world, many of them in South Korea, in honor of the victims.

The statues have drawn the ire of Tokyo, which has apologized to Seoul over the issue and has since pressed for the removal of one of the statues outside its embassy there. Philippine officials had approved the statue in Manila, which was funded by a Filipino-Chinese philanthropist to highlight the suffering of comfort women. Asked about the statue's removal, President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday conceded he knew little about it but urged Filipinos not to "insult" Japan. —AFP

## Jail for top Indonesia politician a 'turning point' in graft war

**JAKARTA:** A hefty 15-year prison term for one of Indonesia's top politicians, who allegedly even staged a car crash to evade arrest, could be a turning point in the country's war on corruption, observers say, as anger boils over against powerful figures living above the law. Setya Novanto's case sparked a mix of rage and disbelief as the disgraced house speaker tried to dodge arrest on graft charges, capped by his suspicious crash into a utility pole shortly after his palatial estate was raided. The car accident—widely believed to have been engineered—landed Novanto in a Jakarta hospital bed with medical tubes up his nose, apparently one step ahead of pursuing anti-corruption investigators.

The images sparked a flurry of mocking online memes, including the popular #SaveTiangListrik (save the electric pole) hashtag. It later emerged that Novanto's now-indicted lawyer had booked his hospital room before the accident happened. The 62-year-old—hailed by Donald Trump as one of Indonesia's most powerful men several years ago—then unsus-

successfully claimed that a bout of diarrhoea left him unable to participate in his trial.

On Tuesday, he was hit with one of Indonesia's heaviest sentences for corruption after being convicted of taking millions of dollars in kickbacks and bribes linked to the national roll-out of government ID cards. Novanto, dubbed Mr Teflon, had escaped corruption allegations before—including being caught on tape trying to extort a US-based miner—and his conviction marked the highest-profile victory in recent memory for Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). "I think this is a milestone for the Corruption Eradication Commission and the anti-corruption movement in general," said Adnan Topan, coordinator for the non-profit Indonesia Corruption Watch. "Setya Novanto is very powerful. He has a strong network."

Novanto was among dozens of politicians, government officials and businessmen implicated in the scandal, which saw an estimated \$170 million syphoned off the \$440 million ID card project. It was the latest example of graft in a country where the legacy of notoriously corrupt dictator Suharto, suspected of looting billions of dollars from state coffers, still looms large. Indonesia ranked 96th out of 180 countries on Transparency International's 2017 corruption index. —AFP

### News in brief

#### Iran 'prostitutes' report

**TEHRAN:** The head of Iran's reformist newspaper Shargh was arrested after residents of a northeastern city accused the paper of defamation over a report on "prostitution" there, Iranian media said yesterday. Mehdi Rahmani was "summoned (by the courts) after a complaint by a group of residents of the Shahid Rajai neighborhood of Mashhad," the semi-official ISNA news agency reported, quoting the city's deputy prosecutor Hassan Heydari. "The newspaper had described some of the district's women as prostitutes," Mashhad's Khorassan newspaper said Rahmani had been detained after failing to pay bail set at 500 million riyals (around \$9,000/7,500 euros). —AFP

#### Taiwan factory blaze

**TAIPEI:** Seven people—five of them firefighters—died in a fire that broke out late Saturday in an electronics factory in northern Taiwan, the local fire department said. The inferno raged through the eight-floor building of a circuit board maker, located in an industrial district in Taoyuan City. Seven firefighters were trapped by large fallen objects as they tried to search for people inside the factory. They were rescued yesterday but only two survived. The two others killed were factory workers from Thailand. Seven other firefighters were injured, five of them suffering burns from an unidentified liquid, according to the fire department. —AFP

#### Lebanese briefly detained

**BEIRUT:** Israel's army said yesterday that it had briefly held a Lebanese woman who crossed the border and then repatriated her, a detention Beirut denounced as an abduction. The Lebanese army said that the woman, Nohad Dali, was taken on Saturday evening from Shebaa, a small disputed area that Israel regards as part of the Golan Heights, which it captured from Syria in 1967, but which Beirut says is Lebanese territory. "An Israeli enemy patrol carried out the abduction of Nohad Dali," a Lebanese army statement said. —Reuters

#### Afghan voter registration

**KABUL:** Afghanistan is air-dropping leaflets as it steps up efforts to boost the low number of voter registrations for upcoming legislative elections, amid concerns that a poor turnout will undermine the credibility of the poll. A series of attacks on voter registration centers across the war-torn country, including a suicide bomb in Kabul a week ago, has deterred many Afghans from signing up to participate in the October 20 ballot. Just over 650,000 adults had registered by Saturday, a fortnight after the two-month long process began, data compiled by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) showed. —AFP

#### The 'Windrush generation'

**LONDON:** British Prime Minister Theresa May is under pressure to introduce legislation guaranteeing a promise of compensation and help applying for citizenship made to long-term residents from the Caribbean incorrectly labeled illegal immigrants. For almost two weeks, British ministers have been struggling to explain why some descendants of the so-called "Windrush generation", invited to Britain to plug labor shortfalls between 1948 and 1971, are being denied basic rights because of trouble documenting their status. The Windrush scandal overshadowed the Commonwealth summit in London earlier this month and has raised questions about May's six-year stint as interior minister before she became prime minister in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum. —Reuters