

## International

# With eye on re-election, Greece leader rolls dice on Macedonia

## PM has one eye on legacy, one eye on elections

ATHENS: Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras is taking a big gamble in trying to settle a decades-old name dispute with neighboring Macedonia which could backfire in a pre-election year among voters already jaded by his economic austerity policies. With about 15 months until the next election is due, the 43-year-old leftist leader has already timed Greece's exit from its third international bailout for this summer in the hope that this will start to bolster his currently poor poll ratings.

Despite trailing the main opposition conservatives by up to 20 percentage points in polls, Tsipras has now also opted to go where all his predecessors have failed, by personally reviving efforts to resolve the name dispute with Macedonia. "He is determined to solve it," said a government official. Athens rejects Macedonia's right to use that name, saying it amounts to a territorial claim on a northern Greek province of the same name and also represents an attempt by the tiny ex-Yugoslav republic to appropriate Greek history and culture. Successive Greek governments have blocked Macedonia's bid to join NATO and the European Union over the name dispute, which is of existential importance to Greek nationalists.

In February, hundreds of thousands of Greeks took to the streets of Athens over the issue, a big-

ger turnout than even the biggest protests held to oppose painful austerity measures imposed by Tsipras under pressure from Greece's creditors. "If a deal is done it would be a bonus. He will say 'I pulled you out of bailouts, I settled the Skopje question'. That way he might make up for other losses," an official from his Syriza party told Reuters on condition of anonymity. Skopje is the capital of Macedonia, a mainly Slavic state with a large ethnic Albanian minority which won its independence from Belgrade in 1991 as Yugoslavia dissolved into civil war.

### Western pressure

Cracking the Macedonia riddle would earn Tsipras kudos in the European Union and the United States, long impatient with what they perceive as Greek obduracy over the name, which they see as destabilizing for the Balkans. Clearing Macedonia's path into NATO and the EU would also help check growing Russian influence in the region, they say.

The clock is ticking towards an EU summit in late June where most member states want to extend a formal invitation to Macedonia to start ac-

cession talks, and a NATO summit in early July, where Greece's allies also back Macedonian membership. However, political analysts say it would be a big risk for Tsipras, whose Syriza party has already seen its support slide amid harsh fiscal reforms, record unemployment and pension cuts which have left a third of all Greeks living in poverty. "There is still a zero-sum mentality (among Greeks) on this name issue," said Kostas Ifantis, an associate professor of international relations at the Panteion University in Athens.

### Tsipras under EU, NATO pressure to settle dispute

Vardar Macedonia (named after a river), Upper Macedonia and, most recently, Ilinden Macedonia, but most Greek political parties reject any use of the name Macedonia, even with descriptive tags. Those parties include both Tsipras's coalition partner, the Independent Greeks, and the main opposition New Democracy party, currently tipped to win most votes in the 2019 election.

### Exploiting divisions

New Democracy was also burned by the Macedonia issue when in power in the mid-1990s. A split between moderates and hardliners toppled the government of then-Prime Minister Constantinos Mitsotakis, and many of those who broke ranks then are now back in the party fold. Now led by Mitsotakis's son, Kyriakos, the party takes an uncompromising public stance on the name issue, but observers say the same divisions which existed in the 1990s persist. Some analysts even suggest Tsipras is primarily motivated in his name diplomacy by a desire to split New Democracy. "It is a gamble which was not taken with the aim of closing an open diplomatic problem that troubles the country but as a tool to divide, at least initially, the opposition," Ifantis said.

In weekend consultations over the name, Tsipras failed to secure the support of any opposition party for the 'Ilinden Macedonia' proposal. But for all the risks, a resolution of the name dispute could still ultimately help to boost Tsipras's popularity, said Costas Panagopoulos, head of the Alco polling agency. "There will be reactions from the opposition, regardless of the name, this is clear," said Panagopoulos. "But in the long-term, a solution, despite the opposition and the initial protests... could not hurt Tsipras." — Reuters

## Catholic Church takes back seat in Ireland abortion vote

DUBLIN: Wary of putting off voters with an overly dogmatic message, the Catholic Church in Ireland has taken a relatively low-key stance ahead of a historic referendum today on repealing an abortion ban. Few members of the clergy have been seen at pro-life demonstrations and Ireland's Association of Catholic Priests has warned churches against giving anti-abortion campaigners a pulpit during mass. "As leadership of an association made up of men who are unmarried and without children of our own, we are not best placed to be in any way dogmatic on this issue," the ACP said in a statement this month.

While underlining the Church's teaching on the right to life, the statement admitted that "human life is complex, throwing up situations that are more often grey than black and white and that demand from us a sensitive, non-judgmental, pastoral approach". The ACP, which represents more than 1,000 Catholic priests in Ireland—around a third of the priesthood, also said in the statement dated May 5 that it would not engage in the debate further.

Linda Hogan, professor of religion at



DUBLIN: Activists from the 'Love Both, Vote No' campaign, including politician Mattie McGrath (center), hold placards urging people to vote 'no' in the referendum to repeal the eighth amendment of the Irish constitution yesterday. — AFP

Trinity College, Dublin said the Church had made a "strategic decision" to limit its official pronouncements on an issue in which its position is already well known. Hogan said this could be a result of the 2015 referendum on legalizing same-sex marriage when the Church took a more vocal position and lost. That referendum was "a wake-up call", Hogan said. Despite multiple abuse scandals in recent years, the Catholic Church still believed it had "a majority of people supporting their position," she said.

### Hoping for 'resounding No'

Around 78 percent of Ireland's popu-

lation declare as Catholics, according to the last census in 2016. But recent opinion polls have shown around half of the population would favor repealing the abortion law, meaning even believers are divided on the issue. "The fact that the yes vote is predicted to be about 53 percent does signal that there is a difference between what the Catholic Church teaches and what Catholics believe," Hogan said. Abortion in Ireland is currently only allowed if the life of the mother is at risk. As a result thousands of Irish women travel to England every year for abortions. — AFP

## Abortion bans around the world

PARIS: The focus this week of a referendum in Ireland and a supreme court challenge in South Korea, abortion is still banned in some 20 countries worldwide, while others have highly restrictive laws in place. In South Korea the Supreme Court will consider repealing a law where abortion is illegal except for instances of rape, incest and when the mother's health is at risk. And in Ireland today voters will decide in a referendum on whether to repeal their own law, which outlaws abortion unless there is a real and substantial risk to the mother's life. Here is a snapshot of the global situation on abortion in countries where the laws are the most restrictive.

### Total ban

Predominantly Catholic Malta is the only European Union country to totally ban abortion, imposing jail terms of between 18 months and three years if the law is broken. Abortion is also banned in Andorra, the Vatican and San Marino, which are in Europe but not the EU. Globally there are total bans in Congo-Brazzaville, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, Laos, Madagascar, Mauritania, Nicaragua, Philippines, Palau, Senegal and Suriname. In El Salvador the internationally criticized criminalization of those found to have terminated pregnancies has led to women being jailed, some serving terms of up to 30 years. —AFP