

International

A race wide open as Germany votes in post-Merkel election

The most unpredictable elections in its recent history

BERLIN: Germany was voting yesterday in one of the most unpredictable elections in its recent history, with Angela Merkel's conservatives and the centre-left Social Democrats in a tight race for her crown as she prepares to leave the political stage. The epochal election ushers in the end of 16 years in power for Merkel and places Germany, a byword for stability, in a new period of uncertainty.

Opinion polls show the race for the chancellery headed for a photo finish, with Merkel's CDU-CSU conservative alliance on around 23 percent, just behind the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) on 25 percent - well within the margin of error. "We will certainly see some surprises," said Nico Siegel, head of the Infratest Dimap polling company. Despite the SPD's lead in the polls, a victory for the conservatives "can't be ruled out", he said. "The race for first place is wide open."

Polls opened at 0600 GMT and will close at 1600 GMT. Around 40 percent of Germany's 60.4 million eligible voters have said they are undecided, while the same proportion have already cast their ballots by post-including Merkel her-

self. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier was among the early voters yesterday, declaring that "to vote is to live democracy" as he cast his ballot in Berlin. The two men jostling for the top job - Finance Minister and Vice Chancellor Olaf Scholz, 63, of the SPD, and Armin Laschet, 60, of the CDU-CSU - voted in their respective hometowns of Potsdam and Aachen.

it will be, and it's always important who governs." In Berlin, Hagen Bartels, 64, said he was expecting "the surprise that the biggest party is not the SPD but probably the CDU".

Close contest

With both parties likely to fall well short of the majority needed to govern alone, there could be weeks or even months of fraught coalition negotiations. After Germany's last election in September 2017, it was February before the CDU-CSU formed a coalition with the SPD. Laschet, an affable but gaffe-prone centrist and longtime Merkel ally, was for some time the clear favorite. But his popularity began to wane after a series of blunders over the summer, including being caught on camera laughing in the background during a tribute to the victims of devastating floods in Germany.

In the meantime, Scholz, who at the start of the year had looked down and out in the race, saw his ratings begin to rise as he avoided making such embarrassing mistakes. Along with social justice, climate change has been one of the top concerns among voters in the run-up to the election. In Aachen, first-time voter



AACHEN: Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leader and candidate for chancellor Armin Laschet and his wife Susanne Laschet arrive to cast their ballots at a polling station in Aachen yesterday. — AFP

Maite Hoppenz, 18, told AFP that climate change was "definitely a big topic for me because I think it will certainly have a big impact on my future". Benedikt

Ruedesheim, 33, said he would have liked to see "a bit more clarity about who is planning what" on climate change as he cast his vote in Berlin. — AFP



Epochal poll marks end of Merkel's reign

Laschet stressed that "every vote counts" in an election that would determine "the direction of Germany in the next years", while Scholz said he hoped the good weather was "a good sign" for his party. At a polling station in Aachen, voter Ursula Becker, 62, told AFP: "This year it's quite exciting who

Abortion rights around the world

PARIS: Abortion laws vary wildly around the world, with a minority of countries having outright bans. Tiny San Marino, which sits on a mountainside in the centre of Italy, is one of the few European countries where terminating a pregnancy is still illegal. It holds a referendum on loosening its abortion ban yesterday. Here is a snapshot of the global situation:

Total ban

Predominantly Catholic Malta is the only European Union country to ban abortion totally, imposing jail terms of between 18 months and three years if the law is broken. Abortion is also banned in the micro-states of Andorra, the Vatican and San Marino, which are in Europe but not members of the EU. San Marino, where abortion is punishable with three years in prison for the woman and six years for the doctor, will vote on liberalizing its law yesterday. It will decide whether to allow abortion up to 12 weeks of pregnancy. After the 12th week, abortion would only be allowed if the mother's life was in danger or in the case of foetal abnormalities which could harm the woman physically or psychologically.

Globally there are other total bans in Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, Laos, Madagascar, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Palau, Senegal and Suriname. In El Salvador, the courts have handed lengthy jail sentences, some of up to 30 years, to women who have lost their babies, including through abortion. Women who have had miscarriages have also been prosecuted.

Restricted

Many countries allow abortions in cases where the mother's life is deemed to be in danger. A partial list includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Guatemala, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Lebanon, Libya, Myanmar, Paraguay, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Uganda, Venezuela, the West Bank/Gaza and Yemen. In Brazil the law only allows terminations in cases of rape, risk to the life of the mother or if the foetus is missing part or all of the brain. In 2017, Chile ended a strict near three-decade-long ban when then president Michelle Bachelet decriminalized abortion in certain cases.

Change

Women from Europe, North America and Oceania benefit from the most liberal legislation, in some cases acquired only recently. Argentina legalized abortions in December 2020 up to 14 weeks of pregnancy. Previously, terminations had only been allowed in two instances: rape, and danger to the mother's life. In 2019 South Korea's constitutional court ordered the country's decades-old abortion ban to be lifted in a landmark ruling.

New Zealand only decriminalized abortion in March 2020. Up to then it was punishable with a 14-year prison term. In Australia, the state of Queensland legalized abortion in 2018, abolishing an 1899 British colonial era law. Only New South Wales, the country's most populous state, continues to ban abortion. In Ireland abortion has only been legal since 2018 following a historic referendum which did away with a constitutional ban on abortion that was one of the strictest in the world. It was also legalized the following year in Northern Ireland, the only part of the United Kingdom where it was prohibited. — AFP

'Eternal' chancellor: Merkel prepares to leave the stage

BERLIN: She was called "the leader of the free world" as authoritarian populists were on the march in Europe and the United States, but Angela Merkel is wrapping up a historic 16 years in power with an uncertain legacy at home and abroad. In office so long she was dubbed Germany's "eternal chancellor", Merkel, 67, leaves with her popularity so resilient she would likely have won a record fifth term had she sought it.

Instead, Merkel will pass the baton as the first German chancellor to step down entirely by choice, with a whole generation of voters never knowing another person at the top. Her supporters say she provided steady, pragmatic leadership through countless global crises as a moderate and unifying figure. Yet critics argue a muddle-through style of leadership, pegged to the broadest possible consensus, lacked the bold vision to prepare Europe and its top economy for the coming decades.

What is certain is that she leaves behind a fractured political landscape.

It is also because of the long shadow she casts that her party's candidate, Armin Laschet, has struggled to sharpen his own profile. His Social Democratic opponent, Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, has actively - and perhaps successfully - sold himself as the real continuity candidate. Assuming she stays on to hand over power, Merkel will tie or exceed Helmut Kohl's longevity record for a post-war leader, depending on how long the upcoming coalition negotiations drag on.

'Do the right thing'

The unflappable Merkel has served for many in recent years as a welcome counterbalance to the big, brash men of global politics, from Donald Trump to Vladimir Putin. A Pew Research Center poll this week showed large majorities in most democracies around the globe having "confidence in Merkel to do the right thing in world affairs".

However, the last days of her tenure have also been marred by what Merkel called the "bitter, dramatic and terri-

Swiss voters firmly back gay marriage

GENEVA: Nearly two-thirds of Swiss voters have approved the government's plan to introduce same-sex marriage, according to the first projections following yesterday's referendum triggered by opponents of the move. Market researchers GFS Bern-who conducted the main polling throughout the campaign-projected that 64 percent of voters backed the "marriage for all" proposals, which would bring the Alpine nation into line with most of western Europe.

The polling stations closed at noon, with the full results expected to follow within hours. Switzerland decriminalized homosexuality in 1942, but numerous local and regional police forces continued to keep "gay registers", some into the early 1990s. Same-sex couples can already register a civil partnership, with around 700 such partnerships established each year.

However, this status does not provide the same rights as marriage,

including for obtaining citizenship and the joint adoption of children. After years of debate and discussion, the Swiss parliament approved a bill last December allowing same-sex couples to marry in the country of 8.6 million people. But it was challenged under Switzerland's direct democracy system, with opponents gathering the 50,000 signatures needed to put the issue to a referendum. The government and parliament urged voters to back "marriage for all", in order to eliminate the "unequal treatment" between heterosexual and gay couples.

Opinion polling during the campaign showed that members of some Christian congregations and supporters of the right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP) - Switzerland's largest political party-were the most likely to oppose legalizing same-sex marriage. The law change will allow same-sex couples to marry in civil ceremonies, and provide them with the same rights as other married couples. Foreign spouses will become eligible to apply for citizenship through a simplified procedure, and same-sex couples will be permitted to jointly adopt. And, in what proved the most controversial aspect of the referendum campaign, lesbian couples will have access



GJAKOVA, KOSOVO: Kosovo artist Alket Pozhegu works on the final touches of an image made with grain and seed, depicting the portrait of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in the town of Gjakova. — AFP

ble" return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan - a debacle in which she shares the blame as Germany completed its evacuation.

A trained quantum chemist raised behind the Iron Curtain, Merkel has long been in sync with her change-averse electorate as a guarantor of stability. Her major policy shifts reflected the wishes of large German majorities - among them phasing out nuclear power after the 2011 Fukushima disaster - and attracted a broad new coalition of

women and urban voters to the once arch-conservative CDU.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, her boldest move - keeping open German borders in 2015 to more than one million asylum seekers - seemed set to determine her legacy. But while many Germans rallied to Merkel's "We can do it" cry, the move also emboldened an anti-migrant party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), ushering a far-right bloc into parliament for the first time since World War II. — AFP



BERN: Supporters pose for a picture after the first projections following a nationwide referendum on same-sex marriage, in Swiss capital Bern. — AFP

to sperm donations.

Stark poster campaign

Opponents plastered Swiss cities with stark posters decrying the commodification of children and warning the law will "kill the father". One of the posters showed a crying baby with its ear tagged like cattle, and the question: "Babies on demand?" Another featuring a huge zombie-like head, meant to represent a dead father, was covered

over by a nearby primary school in the southern Wallis canton out of fear it would frighten the children. A second vote was held alongside the referendum, on an initiative brought forward by the youth wing of the Socialist Party, entitled "Reduce taxes on wages, tax capital equitably". Proponents of the so-called "99 percent" initiative wanted greater taxation on high levels of capital income, with the threshold to be set by parliament. — AFP

Evacuations as Cyclone Gulab bears down on eastern India

KOLKATA: Tens of thousands of people have been evacuated in three Indian states ahead of a cyclone expected to smash into the east coast later, authorities said. Cyclones are a regular menace in the northern Indian Ocean but many scientists say they are becoming more frequent and severe as climate change warms sea temperatures.

Cyclone Gulab is expected to make landfall between the coastal states of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, bearing gusts of up to 95 kilometers per hour, the state-run India Meteorological Department said. The storm system from the Bay of Bengal would bring "strong winds and very heavy (and) extremely heavy rainfall", the weather bureau added in an advisory yesterday. Odisha and Andhra Pradesh officials ordered tens of thousands of people living along the coast to move to shelters, as hundreds of emergency workers were sent to the region.

Authorities in West Bengal-to the north of Odisha-said yesterday that, while Gulab appeared unlikely to hit the state directly, they were still taking precautions. "We have so far evacuated more than 20,000 people to schools (and) government offices, which have been turned to cyclone shelters," Bankim Hazra, a state minister responsible for

the low-lying areas, told AFP. Odisha Special Relief Commissioner P.K. Jena said seven districts in the state were on high alert and evacuation efforts were under way. Ganjam, a coastal district, was expected to be badly hit by the cyclone, Jena added in a statement.

In Andhra Pradesh, some 85,000 families were expected to be moved from low-lying areas to temporary relief shelters. In May, more than a million people were evacuated from their homes along India's east coast before it was battered by Cyclone Yaas with winds gusting up to 155 kilometers an hour-equivalent to a category two hurricane. At least 20 people were killed and tens of thousands were displaced in the storm, which caused widespread damage worth more than \$2 billion in Odisha and West Bengal states and in neighboring Bangladesh. — AFP