

International

# Setback for Modi after loss in key West Bengal election

## DMK sweeps Tamil Nadu polls, landslide win for Left in Kerala

KOLKATA: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist party suffered a setback Sunday when it lost a fiercely contested state poll. Over the past month India held its biggest democratic exercise in two years, with 175 million people eligible to vote in five regional elections.

But the marathon polls involved huge rallies where many attendees were maskless, and a record-breaking coronavirus spike coincided with the final phases of voting. Experts blame complacency about the pandemic, as well as religious festivals attended by millions of devotees and political rallies, for the virus crisis. The most important election was in the eastern state of West Bengal, home to 90 million people. Modi and his right-hand man, Home Minister Amit Shah, campaigned heavily in the state as they sought to end a decade of rule by firebrand leader Mamata Banerjee.

But as results started trickling in, they showed Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) party on course for a third term. Thousands of TMC supporters took to the streets, despite a virus-related ban on celebrations.

In a victory speech later Sunday, 66-year-old Banerjee said West Bengal's "immediate challenge is to combat the COVID-19 and we are confident that we will win". "This victory has saved the humanity, the people of India. It's the victory of India," Banerjee, a fierce critic of Modi, added. Modi tweeted his congratulations but added that his party had grown its support in the state "from a negligible presence earlier".

Banerjee however lost her seat in Nandigram to a former confidant who defected to Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). She vowed to challenge the loss in court. She can still be sworn back in as chief minister, but has to be elected in another constituency within six months. Earlier, polling for two constituencies was postponed after two candidates died of COVID-19. Despite the defeat in West Bengal, there was a silver lining for the BJP "in the sense that it has now established itself as the



CHENNAI: Chief Minister-elect of Tamil Nadu MK Stalin (left) of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, gestures as he delivers a speech during a press conference after winning the Tamil Nadu State election, at the memorial of his father and late Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M Karunanidhi. — AFP

principal opposition to the TMC," political strategist Amitabh Tiwari told AFP.

But it was also a setback since the party's top leadership put "a lot of political capital into the state, they did a lot of rallies... it was perceived to be a close contest and some of the opinion polls were saying that the BJP could win there." The BJP retained the northeastern state of Assam. In Puducherry—a small former French colony previously known as Pondicherry—the BJP was expected to come to power through an alliance amid efforts to

increase its presence in the country's south, where it has been traditionally weak.

And in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, M.K. Stalin returned his DMK party to power after a decade by defeating an incumbent coalition that has the BJP as its national partner. In Kerala in the south, where the BJP until now has played only a bit part, a left-wing alliance retained power with a comfortable victory over a Congress-led coalition. It was the first time a government in the state had been re-elected since 1977. —AFP



Protesters holding a banner supporting the newly-formed National Unity Government (NUG) yesterday as they march in a demonstration against the military coup in Hpakant in Myanmar's Kachin state. — AFP

## Myanmar rebels claim military helicopter downing

YANGON: A leading Myanmar ethnic rebel army said it had shot down a military helicopter yesterday, a day after a renewed junta crackdown on anti-coup protests left at least five civilians dead. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) said it downed the helicopter gunship during fierce clashes near the town of Momauk in the country's far north.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi and seized power on February 1. Security forces have sought to quell near-daily pro-democracy protests with deadly force, while long-simmering conflicts with ethnic rebels have erupted into fierce fighting.

The KIA, which has waged a decades-long insurgency against the military in northern Kachin state, has been hit by air strikes in recent weeks. "They used jet fighter and helicopter gunship since eight this morning to attack our troops. Our troops fired back and this

was how the helicopter was shot down," said KIA spokesman Col Naw Bu, who refused to give details of the weaponry used to down the chopper.

AFP has tried to contact the Myanmar military to seek their account of events, but has not had a response. A number of Myanmar's myriad ethnic rebel groups have come out in support of the anti-coup protest movement, offering shelter and even training to activists who have fled the crackdown. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a local monitoring group, said that at least five civilians were killed in operations to break up protests on Sunday.

AAPP said it was the highest single-day death toll since an ASEAN summit on the Myanmar crisis last month. A total of 765 civilians have been killed in the crackdown, according to the AAPP, though the military disputes the toll, giving a much lower figure. More than 4,500 people have been arrested, the monitor has said, including dozens of journalists.

Yesterday-World Press Freedom Day—a group of foreign embassies in Myanmar condemned the junta's treatment of journalists, saying they had become a "target of repression". Independent media outlets have been shut down or had their licenses revoked, and Myanmar authorities have throttled internet access in an effort to stem the flow of information about the protests and crackdown. —AFP

## Philippines' top diplomat tells China to leave disputed waters

MANILA: The Philippines' top diplomat unambiguously told Beijing where to go yesterday as the government insisted Chinese vessels were still illegally lingering in the disputed South China Sea. "China, my friend, how politely can I put it? Let me see... O... GET OUT," Foreign Secretary Teodoro Loocsin tweeted.

The latest spat between Manila and Beijing over the resource-rich waters—which China claims almost entirely—flared up in March after hundreds of Chinese boats were spotted inside the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone. China has refused repeated calls from the Philippines to withdraw the boats, and tensions have intensified as Manila steps up maritime patrols in the area. Loocsin frequently uses strong language on Twitter and defended his latest outburst by saying: "Usual suave diplomatic speak gets nothing done." He also likened China to "an ugly oaf forcing your attentions on a handsome guy who wants to be a friend".

The order came as his foreign affairs department accused China's coastguard of "belligerent actions" against Filipino boats involved in maritime drills near the contested Scarborough Shoal.

China-controlled Scarborough is one of the region's

richest fishing grounds and a flashpoint between the two countries, which have rival claims. The department said it has lodged a diplomatic protest over the Chinese vessels' actions towards the Southeast Asian country's coastguard during patrols and training exercises near the reef last month. The department said the presence of the Chinese boats was a "blatant infringement of Philippine sovereignty". China's embassy in Manila did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Scarborough Shoal is 240 kilometers (150 miles) west of the Philippines' main island of Luzon. China seized it in 2012 and has subsequently ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its historical claim over most of the South China Sea to be without basis. —AFP



In this Jan 21, 2021 photo, Philippines Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro L. Loocsin, Jr delivers his intervention during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers' Retreat

## NZ not dodging differences with China: Ardern

WELLINGTON: New Zealand's differences with China on human rights are becoming "harder to reconcile". Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said yesterday, after Wellington faced criticism for failing to challenge its largest trading partner. Ardern's government has taken flak over its meek criticisms of China's rights record, leading to accusations New Zealand is a weak link in the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network.

In a speech at a China Business Summit in Auckland, Ardern said New Zealand had already raised "grave concerns" with China about the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang province and spoken out about the erosion of democratic freedoms in Hong Kong. But the center-left leader said Wellington had an independent foreign policy and was free to choose whether it flagged such issues publicly or during private discussions with Chinese officials. Regardless of how the human rights concerns were dealt with, Ardern admitted there were some issues upon which China and New Zealand would never agree.

"It will not have escaped the attention of anyone here that as China's role in the world grows and changes, the differences between our systems—and the interests and values that shape those systems—are becoming harder to reconcile," she said. "This is a challenge that we, and many other countries across the Indo-Pacific region, but also in Europe and other regions, are also grappling with." Ardern said pointing out areas of difference with Beijing was "part and parcel of New Zealand staying true to who we are as a nation". "We need to acknowledge that there are some things on which China and New Zealand do not, cannot, and will not agree," she said. "This need not derail our relationship, it is simply a reality." New Zealand's Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta expressed unease last month about the decades-old Five Eyes alliance—comprised of the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand—for moving beyond its remit of intelligence-sharing between member nations. It came just months after Trade Minister Damien O'Connor urged Australia to show more "respect" to Beijing in the wake of New Zealand signing an upgraded free trade deal with China. —AFP

## Covax inks deal for 500m Moderna vaccine doses

GENEVA: The Covax global vaccine equity program said yesterday it has struck a deal to buy 500 million doses of Moderna's COVID-19 jabs. The doses, to come on stream from October at the earliest, will broaden out the portfolio of vaccines in the Covax scheme, which has so far been heavily reliant on the AstraZeneca vaccine and hit by delays. The Moderna doses are expected to start supplying Covax in the final quarter of 2021, with 34 million doses available before the end of the year, the Covax scheme's co-leader Gavi announced in a statement. A further 466 million doses will follow in 2022.

The Covax facility ensures access to jabs in poor countries, with the cost covered by donors. Wealthier countries can bulk-buy through the scheme. Covax is co-led by the World Health Organization, the Gavi vaccine alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations.

The scheme aims to distribute enough doses to vaccinate up to 27 percent of the population in the 92 poorest territories participating in the program by the end of the year. "We are very pleased to sign this new

### News in brief

#### Leftist Castillo leading in Peru

LIMA: Far-left labor unionist Pedro Castillo is ahead of right-wing populist Keiko Fujimori among voters before Peru's June 6 presidential runoff, according to a poll released Sunday. Schoolteacher Castillo has garnered 43 percent of voting intention, while corruption-accused Fujimori—daughter of jailed ex-president Alberto Fujimori—has 34 percent of voters' preference, according to the Ipsos poll. The poll showed that 13 percent of voters said they would cast blank or null ballots, and 10 percent did not specify their voting intention. Castillo added one percentage point and Fujimori three compared to the Ipsos poll conducted between April 15 and 16. — AFP

#### Three dead after boat capsizes

LOS ANGELES: An overcrowded smuggling boat capsized Sunday off the California coast after crashing into the shoreline, killing three people and leaving 27 people hospitalized with a range of injuries, authorities said. The accident happened Sunday morning off San Diego, with all aboard the 40-foot (12 meters) vessel jumping into the choppy water as it slowly disintegrated, witness video showed. "It was a smuggling vessel," Jeffery Stephenson of the Customs and Border Protection Public Affairs Office told reporters. "Border Patrol agents are with a man we believe was the operator." — AFP

#### Bushfire cloaks Sydney in smoke

SYDNEY: Sydney was enveloped in a thick bank of hazardous bushfire smoke yesterday, forcing authorities in Australia's largest city to scale back controlled forest burning nearby. Ferries were cancelled and the city's five million residents were told to stay indoors if necessary, as air pollution levels spiked. Levels of hazardous PM 2.5 pollution—particles that can seep deep into the lungs and cause respiratory illnesses—were among the worst in the world at more than 190 on the air quality index. Australia's fire services regularly try to carry out "hazard reduction burning" outside summer months, clearing the forest floors of debris that can fuel wildfires. — AFP

#### Niger army killed 24 'terrorists'

NIAMEY, Niger: Niger troops killed 24 "suspected terrorists" after they sought to escape after being captured in the west of the country, the government said Sunday. The suspects had been planning an attack on the market town of Banibangou but the army was alerted and, after an exchange of fire, 26 people were arrested on April 28, the defense ministry said in a statement. One of the "suspected terrorists" died later from gun wounds. As they were awaiting transfer to nearby Chingodiar, where there is a military base "the prisoners tried to escape" overnight on Thursday and managed to disarm a guard, the ministry said. — AFP

#### Taiwan investigating defector claim

TAIPEI: Taiwan's defense minister yesterday said authorities were investigating whether a man from mainland China had managed to cross the Taiwan Strait in a rubber dinghy in a bid to seek political sanctuary. On Saturday, police said a man surnamed Zhou had been detained in Taichung city's harbour after locals spotted him near a dyke and said he was behaving suspiciously. Police said the man told them he had travelled from Fujian on China's southeastern coast in a rubber dinghy fitted with an outboard motor and 90 liters of fuel. The man said he wanted to move to Taiwan to seek "freedom and democracy", police said. — AFP



SAN ANTONIO, Texas: In this file photo, Fransella Kriestel receives her second dose of Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at a vaccination site in San Antonio, Texas. — AFP

agreement with Moderna, giving Covax facility participants access to yet another highly efficacious vaccine," said Gavi chief executive Seth Berkley. "Expanding and having a diverse portfolio has always been a core goal for Covax, and to remain adaptable in the face of this continually evolving pandemic — including the rising threat posed by new variants. This agreement is a further step in that direction."

The agreement also contains options for potential future access to Moderna vaccines that have been adapted to variants of the virus. — AFP