

Zelensky Seeks to Boost Power as Ukraine Votes



Zelensky's newly-created party is expected to win the largest share of the votes.

KIEV (AFP) -- Ukrainians on Sunday went to the polls to elect a new parliament as comedian-turned-president Volodymyr Zelensky seeks to bring in political newcomers and consolidate power.

Zelensky's newly-created party is expected to win the largest share of the votes in the early polls expected to usher in a new era in the country dominated up to now by politicians who grew up in the Soviet Union.

The leader's party Servant of the People -- named after a sitcom in which he played a president -- is predicted to get roughly half of the vote even though it barely existed before

Zelensky won a landslide victory in an April presidential vote.

Zelensky, however, may not secure a majority and would need to form a coalition, possibly with rock star Svyatoslav Vakarchuk's newly-created party Golos (Voice).

After casting his ballot, the 41-year-old leader said he would make a decision about possible coalition partners after the results of the vote are out.

"We do not see a coalition with the old authorities," Zelensky said in the capital Kiev, wearing a casual blue shirt.

The outgoing parliament, dominated by Zelensky's predecessor Petro

Poroshenko, has been hostile to the actor, who called a snap election during his swearing-in as president.

The Ukrainian president must share power with parliament, which will nominate a prime minister and form a government.

Many said they voted for the leader's party.

"He was elected but he can't do anything. They (lawmakers) constantly put sticks in his wheels and dump his ideas," Valentyna, an 82-year-old pensioner told AFP in central Kiev.

The rise of Zelensky and his party has been viewed as a rejection of Ukraine's political elite for failing to improve living standards, root out corruption and end the conflict with Russian-backed separatists that began in 2014.

Some said they wanted the former comedian and the rock singer to join forces to push through much-needed reform.

In a boon for the Kremlin, a pro-Moscow party called Opposition Platform--For Life is the second most popular in opinion polls, with up to 13 percent of voter support.

One of the party's top candidates, Viktor Medvedchuk is close to Russian President Vladimir Putin and claims he is his daughter's godfather. The two met for talks in Russia just days before the vote.

South Korea: U.S. Drill to Proceed Despite North's Anger



South Korean and United States Marines during a joint military exercise in South Korea in 2016.

ASPEN, Colo. (Dispatches) -- South Korea says a joint military exercise with the U.S. will go ahead as planned next month, despite North Korea's warning that the drill could wreck denuclearization talks.

North Korea said on Tuesday U.S. President Donald Trump had reaffirmed in a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un last month that the joint drills would be halted.

Pyongyang said the planned exercise is "clearly a breach" of the two leaders' agreement and that proceeding with it would jeopardize nuclear talks with the United States.

"The nature of the exercise is not offensive...and is for strengthening the alliance..." Choi Jong-kun, the secretary for peace planning to South Korean President Moon Jae-in, said on Saturday.

Choi said Washington would have consulted with the government in Seoul if Trump had agreed to suspend the war games during his talks with Kim on the North Korean border last month.

"As far as I know, President Trump did not promise the cancellation of this upcoming military exercise," Choi said. "If he had done that...we would have been consulted and organized it and used it very strategically."

Speaking with Reuters, Choi later said the military drills planned for August would largely involve computer simulations and not troops in the field.

There are close to 30,000 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, and their annual drills with thousands of South Korean soldiers have always infuriated the North.

North Korea has strongly denounced joint military exercises between South Korea and the U.S., saying they pose an "all-out challenge" to efforts towards peace on the Korean Peninsula.

The North put a halt on its missile launches and nuclear tests, shortly before a diplomatic thaw began between Pyongyang and Seoul and led to the first ever summit between the North Korean leader and the U.S. president in Singapore in June last year.

The halt was among many other steps that the Pyongyang has taken to move forward in its denuclearization negotiations with the U.S., but the talks have made little progress, mainly because Washington refuses to lift its harsh sanctions on North Korea.

In February, Trump and Kim met for a second time at a summit in Vietnam's capital, Hanoi, but the meeting broke up without an agreement or even a joint statement as the two sides failed to reach a consensus.

Trump walked away from the summit, claiming that Kim had insisted on the removal of all sanctions on North Korea. Pyongyang rejected that account, stressing that it had only asked for a partial lifting of the bans.

Trump Relished 'Send Her Back' Chant



A right-wing commentator has suggested that the crowd's chant at a rally in North Carolina could be a new campaign slogan for the president's re-election campaign.

NEW YORK (Reuters) - U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said that President Donald Trump relished a chant by the crowd at a campaign rally this week that called for a Democratic congresswoman to be sent back where she came from.

Trump renewed his criticism of four minority women lawmakers on Friday, saying that they had said horrible things about the United States, and defended himself from criticism over his comment that they should leave the United States if unhappy.

A day after saying his audience in North Carolina went too far when they chanted "Send her back!" about Somalia-born Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, on Friday he defended the crowd members as "incredible patriots."

Appearing before her constituents in New York City for the first time since the latest flare-up between Trump and the four Democratic congresswomen, Ocasio-Cortez rejected the president's statement that he had tried to quiet the crowd, saying he had egged them on instead. "Roll back the tape ... He relished it.

He took it in and he's doing this intentionally," the freshman U.S. lawmaker told about 200 constituents gathered for a town hall meeting on immigration at a school in the Corona section of Queens.

Video of the crowd in North Carolina shouting "Send her back!" shows Trump pausing his speech and looking around the arena for about ten seconds.

The president's attacks on the four congresswomen - known on Capitol Hill as "the squad" - have been condemned by Democrats as racist, while many Republicans have shrugged them off.

Last weekend Trump ignited a firestorm by tweeting the four should "go back" to where they came from if they do not like the United States.

All four are American citizens. Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan were born in the United States while Omar came as a refugee from Somalia and is a naturalized citizen.

All four are known as sharp critics of Trump's policies as well as the Democratic leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives.



TOKYO (Dispatches) -- Japanese voters took to the polls Sunday to cast their ballots in an upper house election that could determine whether Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ruling party would be allowed to realize a long-held ambition of revising the country's U.S.-drafted pacifist constitution. A total of 370 candidates are vying for 124 seats out of the 245 that make up the parliament's upper house, known as the House of Councillors. Opinion polls suggest Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner, the Buddhist Komeito, are likely to grab a two-thirds majority in the chamber. Abe vowed earlier this month to "clearly stipulate the role of the Self-Defense Forces in the constitution," which prohibits Japan from waging war and maintaining a military. The provisions, imposed by the U.S. after World War II, are popular with the public at large but frowned upon by nationalists like Abe, who see them as outdated and punitive. The crucial vote comes at a time when Abe has been struggling to resolve the territorial dispute with Russia and establish a foothold in the South China Sea in the face of an assertive Beijing. The U.S. supports Abe's push to renounce the pacifist constitution because it paves the way for the sale of American weapons to Japan. Under Abe, Japan has already announced that it will spend a record \$242 billion on military equipment over the next five years, 6.4 percent higher than the previous five-year plan.

LONDON (AP) -- British Treasury chief Philip Hammond said Sunday that he will quit if -- as widely expected -- Boris Johnson becomes prime minister this week on a promise to leave the European Union with or without a divorce deal. Hammond said Johnson's vow to press for a no-deal Brexit if he can't secure a new agreement with the EU is "not something that I could ever sign up to." Hammond was almost certain to be removed from office by the new leader in any case. He has angered Brexit-backers, who now dominate the governing Conservative Party, with his warnings about the economic pain that leaving the EU could cause. Hammond told the BBC that if Johnson wins, "I'm not going to be sacked because I'm going to resign before we get to that point." Johnson is the strong favorite to win a two-person runoff to lead the Conservative Party and the country. The winner is being announced Tuesday, with the victor taking over from Prime Minister Theresa May on Wednesday. Britain is due to leave the EU on Oct. 31 but Parliament has repeatedly rejected the divorce deal struck between May and the bloc. Both Johnson and his rival Jeremy Hunt, the current foreign secretary, say they will leave the EU without an agreement if the EU won't renegotiate.

DERA ISMAIL KHAN, Pakistan (Reuters) -- A female suicide bomber in northwestern Pakistan killed at least eight people and wounded 26 more in an attack outside a local civilian hospital on Sunday, local officials said. The attack in Dera Ismail Khan early on Sunday was claimed by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, often known as the Pakistani Taliban, which is separate from the insurgent movement across the border in Afghanistan. Local officials said the attack happened after two police were killed at a roadside checkpoint outside the city. Muhammed Khurasani, a spokesman for the TTP, claimed responsibility for the attack, which he said was carried out in revenge for the killing of two Taliban commanders by counter terrorism police around a month ago. However he denied the bomber was female. Dera Ismail Khan has seen a number of suicide attacks over the past decade as the Pakistani military carried out a campaign to suppress militant attacks in the area, an economic hub in the \$60 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

TUNIS (Reuters) -- Rached Ghannouchi, the influential leader of Tunisia's moderate Ennahda party, will stand in the next parliamentary elections in October, a move widely seen as an attempt to seek a leadership position in the country. Exiled in London for about two decades during the time of former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Ghannouchi has been a major force since Tunisia's 2011 revolution, but he has never run for any official position. The 78-year-old remains a dominant figure who critics say effectively controls the country in tandem with the secular-minded President Beji Caid Essebsi, 92, often dubbed the "two sheikhs" in reference to their age. Ghannouchi's candidacy for a parliamentary seat reinforces expectations that he is seeking to play a bigger role, possibly as prime minister or speaker of parliament, if his party wins the election. Parliamentary elections are expected to be held on Oct. 6 with a presidential vote following on Nov. 17. They will be the third set of polls in which Tunisians can vote freely following the 2011 revolution.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- U.S. national security adviser John Bolton departed for a trip to Japan and South Korea, two key allies of Washington that are embroiled in a trade dispute. A White House National Security Council spokesman said on Twitter that Bolton planned to "continue conversations with critical allies and friends." President Donald Trump on Friday offered his help to ease tensions in the political and economic dispute between the United States' two biggest allies in Asia, which threatens global supplies of memory chips and smartphones. Lingering tensions, particularly over compensation for South Koreans forced to work for Japanese occupiers during World War Two, worsened this month when Japan restricted exports of high-tech materials to South Korea. Japan has denied that the dispute over compensation is behind the export curbs, even though one of its ministers cited broken trust with Seoul over the labor dispute in announcing the restrictions.

Over 1,000 Firefighters Battle Wildfires in Portugal



Flames of an approaching forest fire are seen near the small village of Gondomil, near Valenca, Portugal March 27, 2019.

LISBON (AFP) -- Planes and helicopters joined more than a thousand firefighters in central Portugal Sunday to battle huge wildfires in a mountainous region where over 100 people died in huge blazes in 2017.

By 9:30 am (0830 GMT), one of the biggest mobilizations ever seen in the area -- including 1,100 firefighters and 340 vehicles -- had been deployed to fight the blazes in the heavily forested Castelo Branco region, 200 kilometers (120 miles) north of Lisbon, the rescue services said.

The biggest effort -- 760 firefighters, 230 vehicles and 11 planes and helicopters -- battled to douse flames

in the municipality of Vila de Rei, which had spread nearly 25 kilometers.

One seriously injured civilian was evacuated by helicopter to Lisbon, the commander of the Civil Protection for the region, Luis Belo Costa, told a news conference.

Four firefighters were also reported injured, and a further three were hurt after their fire engine collided with another.

"Given the difficult terrain, we have not succeeded in getting the fire in Vila de Rei under control, but have only contained about 60 percent of it, despite a lull in the wind," Belo Costa

said. The army said in a statement it was dispatching 20 soldiers and machinery to open routes "to facilitate access" for the firefighters.

In a message, President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa expressed his "solidarity with the hundreds fighting the scourge of the fires".

Two other forest fires reported on Saturday have since been brought under control.

While a number of small villages were evacuated as a precaution overnight, no additional measures were planned on Sunday.

But that could change "if the situation deteriorates," Belo Costa said.

Five regions of central and southern Portugal were on maximum fire alert Sunday because of the dry weather and winds.

However, temperatures are currently below the threshold of 41 degrees Celsius (105 Fahrenheit) at which a red alert is triggered.

The fires, fanned by strong winds, had broken out on Saturday afternoon in the more inaccessible areas in the Castelo Branco region.

The centre of Portugal is hilly and covered in dense forest and is regularly ravaged by fires, including the deadliest in the country's history where 114 people died in two separate blazes in June and October 2017.

Portugal is still traumatized by those deaths, with authorities taking extra precautions.

GNA Government Says:

Haftar Preparing for New Offensive to Take Tripoli

TRIPOLI (Dispatches) -- Libya's UN-recognized government says forces loyal to strongman General Khalifa Haftar appear to be preparing for a new offensive to capture the capital city Tripoli.

Haftar's initial offensive launched on April 4 to take the city from the Government of National Accord (GNA) failed to break through Tripoli's defenses.

His forces are currently bogged down on the capital's southern outskirts, but the renegade general has defied a truce call by the United Nations and ordered his troops not to relent in their offensive.

The GNA said on its Facebook page Saturday that it is "concerned over reports, on preparations for a new military escalation".

Videos circulated on social media in recent days show columns of military vehicles belonging to Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA),

trucking towards the south of the capital.

Via a post published on one of its official Facebook pages on Friday, LNA urged young people in Tripoli to join Haftar's forces to eliminate all militias allied with the Tripoli-based government.

It has left nearly 1,093 people dead, and over 5,750 wounded, according to the UN's World Health Organization. The fighting has also forced more than 100,000 people to flee their homes.

In his offensive, Haftar is supported by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and France.

U.S. President Donald Trump has also "recognized Field Marshal Haftar's significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources," according to the White House.

European countries, including Italy and France, have taken a strong interest in Libya, both because of its natural resources and its status as a leading departure point for refugees attempt-

ing to enter Europe across the Mediterranean Sea.

The GNA has said France has been blocking resolutions at the UN Security Council, the European Union, and other international organizations opposing Haftar's push to capture Tripoli.

In a tweet on Saturday, the United Nations mission in Libya said it was "doing its utmost with all local and foreign actors to avoid military escalation and to ensure protection of civilians".

Libya has been plunged into chaos since 2011 when NATO's intervention in the country's popular uprising led to the ouster of long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi and his execution by unruly fighters.

Since then, the North African country has been divided between two rival governments -- one located in the east and the other in the west of the country and each backed by an array of rival militias.