

Greens Crank Up Pressure on Macron After Vote Win



Mayor Anne Hidalgo arrives to deliver a speech after winning the second round of the French municipal elections in Paris.

PARIS (AFP) -- France's Greens on Monday urged President Emmanuel Macron to prioritize the environment as they savored big wins in municipal elections, seen by many as a rebuke of the centrist leader's top-down governing style during his first three years in office.

Yannick Jadot, head of the Europe Ecology - Green Party (EELV), said the results proved that Macron had been "in denial" over growing public demand for ambitious measures to fight climate change.

Jadot told Europe 1 radio the EELV would not join Macron's government as part of a widely expected cabinet shake-up, saying instead the president should

enact "as he promised" 149 measures proposed this month by his Citizen's Convention on Climate.

Macron was to meet the council's members on Monday when he planned a "first response" to their proposals, which included reducing motorway speed limits and making "ecocide" a crime.

Voters handed the Greens control of key cities including Lyon, Bordeaux and Strasbourg, while Socialist Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo was re-elected after forming an alliance with the EELV.

Traditional rightwing and Socialist parties managed respectable showings, with the rightwing Republicans winning in more than half of cities with more than 9,000 residents.

Macron's Republic on the Move, however, was roundly rejected, with only five of 10 ministers in his government securing wins in the cities they contested.

They included his Prime Minister Edouard Philippe -- even though he isn't a card-carrying LREM member -- who was elected mayor of the Atlantic port city of Le Havre, heightening speculation he could leave the government and give Macron the possibility of naming a more left-leaning premier.

The delayed second round of local polls took place more than three months after the March 15 first round held two days before France's coronavirus lockdown.

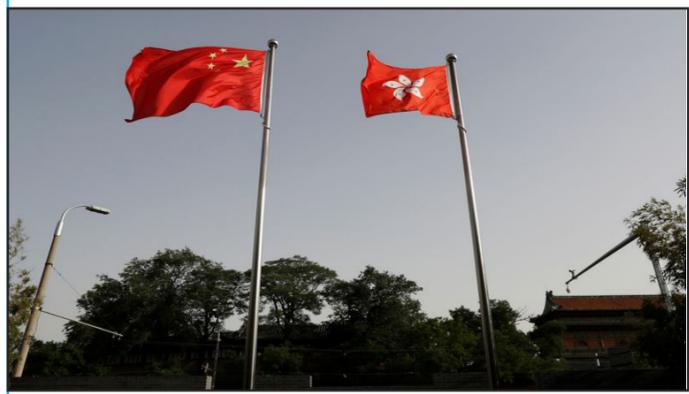
Government spokeswoman Sibeth Ndiaye expressed "disappointment" late Sunday over the LREM's poor showing, which analysts attributed to Macron's failure to build the party into a viable force at the local level.

"There are places... where our own internal divisions brought us to results that were extremely disappointing," Ndiaye told French television.

In Paris in particular, LREM candidate Agnes Buzyn, the former health minister, was hobbled by a dissident LREM candidate, star mathematician Cedric Villani.

Hidalgo, who has vowed to limit the use of cars in the French capital, thanked voters in her victory speech for choosing "a Paris that breathes, a Paris that is more agreeable to live in".

China Plans Visa Curbs on Americans With 'Egregious Conduct'



The Chinese and Hong Kong flags flutter at the office of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in Beijing, June 3, 2020.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- Beijing said on Monday it will impose visa restrictions on U.S. individuals with "egregious conduct" on Hong Kong-related issues, mirroring U.S. sanctions against unnamed Chinese officials.

The announcement comes as the top decision-making body of China's parliament deliberates a draft national security law for Hong Kong.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, who announced the new sanctions during a press briefing in response to a question about Washington's new visa restrictions, did not specify which U.S. individuals have been targeted.

"The U.S. is attempting to obstruct China's legislation for safeguard-

ing national security in the HK SAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) by imposing the so-called sanctions, but it will never succeed," he told reporters.

"In response ... China has decided to impose visa restrictions on U.S. individuals with egregious conduct on HK related issues."

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week that the new visa restrictions by Washington apply to "current and former" officials of China's ruling Communist Party "believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, undermining Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy."

The U.S. Senate also approved a bill last week that would impose mandatory sanctions on people or compa-

nies that the U.S. accuses of backing efforts to restrict Hong Kong's autonomy. It includes secondary sanctions on banks that do business with anyone deemed as threatening the territory's autonomy.

Zhao, the foreign ministry spokesman, told reporters that China has lodged a complaint with the U.S. over the bill and warned that Beijing will respond with strong countermeasures in response to U.S. actions on Hong Kong.

Last month, Hong Kong's legislature debated and passed a bill, criminalizing sedition, secession and subversion against the mainland. The law drew harsh criticism from some Western governments, particularly the U.S., which claim that the law threatens the semi-autonomous stance of the city.

Beijing, however, insists that the new law does not pose a threat to Hong Kong's autonomy and the interests of foreign investors, noting that it is merely meant to prevent terrorism and foreign interference there, which were evident in the violent riots there against the government last year.

Hong Kong was rocked by violent protests over another bill that would have reformed its extradition law last year. Rioters vandalized the city, destroying public and private property and attacking anyone deemed to be pro-government. Hong Kong dropped that bill, but the acts of violence continued.

Gunmen Attack Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi

KARACHI, Pakistan (Reuters) -- Gunmen attacked the Pakistan Stock Exchange building in the city of Karachi on Monday killing two guards and a policeman before security forces killed all four of the attackers, police said.

Separatist insurgents from Balochistan province - the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) - claimed responsibility in a post on Twitter but Reuters was not able to verify the authenticity of the claim and spokesmen for the group were not available for comment.

The police chief in Pakistan's biggest city and financial hub, Ghulam Nabi Memon, told Reuters the gunmen attacked with grenades and guns after pulling up in a silver Corolla car.

They threw a grenade at security men posted outside the compound then opened fire on a security post. The four were killed when security forces posted there responded.

Their car was abandoned where they left it. Two guards and a policeman were killed and seven people were wounded, Deputy Inspector General of Police Sharjil Kharal told media.

A counter-terrorism official told Reuters the attackers were carrying significant quantities of ammunition and grenades in backpacks.

The BLA claimed responsibility in a brief message on a Twitter account set up shortly before the raid, describing it as a "self-sacrificing" attack carried out by its Majeed brigade.

The account was suspended a short time after the attack.

Separatists have been fighting for years in resource-rich Balochistan, complaining the southwestern province's gas and mineral wealth is unfairly exploited by Pakistan's richer, more powerful provinces.

The BLA's militant brigade also took responsibility for an attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in 2018. Several projects linked to China's Belt and Road initiative are in Balochistan.

That month, three explosions on the same day claimed by a little-known separatist group killed four people including two soldiers in the southern province of Sindh, of which Karachi is capital.

The Pakistan Stock Exchange did not suspend trading during the attack. Its main KSE-100 index dropped 220 points but it later recovered and was 200 points higher at 0830 GMT.

Islamist militants have also launched attacks in Karachi and elsewhere in Pakistan over the years but their violence has become less frequent after military operations against various factions in strongholds on the Afghan border.

PM Johnson: Coronavirus 'a Disaster' for Britain



A man wearing a protective visor crosses the road in Leicester as the city may be the first UK location to be subjected to a local lockdown.

LONDON (Dispatches) -- Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the coronavirus crisis had been a disaster for the United Kingdom and while the government would look at what went wrong it was not the right time to have an inquiry into missteps.

"This has been a disaster," Johnson told Times Radio. "Let's not mince our words, I mean this has been an absolute nightmare for the country and the country has gone through a profound shock."

Johnson also said reports of him looking wraithlike were complete nonsense.

British opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said on Monday that Johnson has been asleep at the wheel during the coronavirus crisis and had been far too slow to make major decisions.

"I think the prime minister has been asleep at the wheel, he has been slow, the comms, the communications has been terrible," Starmer told ITV. "It began to break down frankly when Dominic Cummings put forward a ridiculous defense of what he had done in the north east."

"They haven't done the groundwork on test, trace and isolate," Starmer said.

Johnson said the coronavirus crisis

needed the type of massive economic response U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt mobilized to deal with the Great Depression.

Britain, he said, was heading for "bumpy times" as it struggles through its biggest economic contraction on record.

He intends to unveil a spending program in a speech Tuesday his office has simply dubbed "build, build, build".

"I think this is the moment for a Rooseveltian approach to the UK, really really moving forward," said Johnson. "I really think the investment will pay off."

"The country has gone through a profound shock. But in those moments you have the opportunity to change and to do things better," Johnson said.

"We really want to build back better, to do things differently, to invest in infrastructure, transport, broadband -- you name it."

Johnson's interview with Times Radio comes a week before the full reopening of restaurants, pubs and other parts of the hospitality, tourism and cultural sectors in England for the first time since March 20.

A full lockdown was imposed three days later, and has been one of the longest in Europe.

Poll: Most Russians Back Constitutional Reforms



Russian President Vladimir Putin takes the oath during an inauguration ceremony at the Kremlin in Moscow, May 7, 2018.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- Russian state pollster VCIOM on Monday published an exit poll showing a vast majority of Russians backing proposed constitutional reforms, days before the end of voting.

Some 76 percent of respondents voted for the package of amendments, which range from better pensions and minimum wages to a reset of term limits that would allow President Vladimir Putin to run again in 2024 and potentially stay in power until 2036.

The vote, which the opposition has slammed as illegal and prone to rigging, began last week and is due to end on Wednesday.

VCIOM, which stands for the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, polled more than 163,000 voters in 25 regions, with about 70 percent agreeing to say how they voted.

The co-chairman of election monitoring group Golos, Grigory Melkonyants, told Business FM radio that the publication of figures before the end of voting could unduly "influence the will of citizens".

This is why the publication of exit polls is banned before the end of voting, he noted.

VCIOM said it decided to publish the figures because of "high demand" for

the data and dismissed the idea that it could influence the outcome.

"It's not against the law to publish," the center's director Valery Fyodorov told AFP in an emailed comment.

Election commission chief Ella Pamfilova said the body had recommended to wait until the end of voting but that the center did not do anything illegal.

The constitutional vote has to abide by its own special law, rather than Russia's regular election legislation, which forbids publication of data during a "silent period" immediately before and during voting.

"The law (on the constitutional vote) does not regulate this," Pamfilova told Business FM radio.

Voting started in Russia on Thursday after a decision to spread the plebiscite over a week to avoid crowds during the coronavirus epidemic.

Advertisements running frequently on television ask Russians to vote without any mention of the clause that effectively "zeros" Putin's time in the Kremlin and opens the possibility of him staying on for two more terms until 2036.

The Kremlin reluctantly postponed the vote, originally scheduled for April 22, as coronavirus cases increased and officials imposed restrictions to slow the spread.

News in Brief

PARIS (AP) -- A Nigerian commission has called for the cancellation of an auction Monday of sacred Nigerian statues in Paris, which it alleges were stolen. Christie's auction house has defended the sale, saying the artworks were legitimately acquired and the sale will go ahead. French courts have consistently ruled in favor of auction houses in recent years whose sales of sacred objects, such as Hopi tribal masks, were contested by rights groups and representatives of the tribes. A Princeton scholar, professor Chika Okeke-Agulu, alongside Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments, raised alarm earlier this month that the objects were looted during the Biafran war in the late 1960's. Christie's wrote earlier this month to the Nigerian commission, saying the sale would go ahead. Okeke-Agulu, who is a member of the Igbo tribe, said the objects were taken through "an act of violence" from his home state of Anambra and that they should not be sold. An online petition with over 2,000 signatures is demanding that the auction be halted.

LONDON (AFP) -- The British newspaper group that owns The Times and the Sunday Times on Monday launched a news and current affairs radio station, aiming to position itself as a rival to the BBC. Times Radio went live on digital radio and online at 0500 GMT and had Prime Minister Boris Johnson as its first big-name guest. The new station said it aims to appeal to listeners who may have been turned off by what it called the "febrile tone of political debate" on other radio networks. Instead of "unnecessarily adversarial interviews" and presenter interruptions, it wants to focus on "informed expertise". The Times said in an article to announce the launch. Times Radio is a partnership between The Times, the Sunday Times weekly and its owners' News UK's radio division, Wire- less, which also owns the Talksport and Talkradio networks.

GUWAHATI, India (Reuters) -- Heavy flooding triggered by monsoon rains has forced more than a million people to flee their homes in the northeast Indian state of Assam, authorities said on Monday, warning that the crisis was becoming more critical by the hour. The Brahmaputra River, one of the largest rivers in the world which flows from Tibet into India and then into Bangladesh, burst its banks in Assam over the weekend, inundating more than 2,000 villages, and it was still raining on Monday. "Two people have died in separate incidents of drowning in the past 24 hours and more than one million people have been affected, with the flood situation turning critical by the hour," a state government flood bulletin said. Torrential rain hit at least 23 of Assam's 33 districts and the federal water resources body said water levels in the Brahmaputra were expected to rise, with more rain forecast over the next three days.

SYDNEY (Reuters) -- Australia's second most populous state said on Monday it is considering reimposing social distancing restrictions after the country reported its biggest one-day rise in new coronavirus infections in more than two months. While many states and territories have yet to report their latest numbers, Victoria said it has detected 75 cases in the past 24 hours - enough to make it Australia's biggest daily outbreak since April 11. The growing figures have stoked fears of a second wave in Australia after several weeks of fewer than 20 new cases a day and come as the global death toll from the virus tops half a million people.

WARSAW (AFP) -- Conservative incumbent Andrzej Duda has secured pole position in Poland's presidential election and will face Warsaw's liberal mayor in the run-off next month, official results showed Monday. Duda, who is backed by the governing Law and Justice (PiS) party, got 43.7 percent of the ballot with over 99 percent of polling stations counted, according to the national election commission. Runner-up Rafal Trzaskowski had 30.3 percent, taking the Civic Platform (PO) party member into round two of the election on July 12. Independent candidate Rafal Holownia came in third with 13.9 percent. None of the other eight candidates topped 10 percent. Turnout was 64.4 percent. The commission said it will release the final results early Tuesday at the latest. The electoral campaign was dominated by concerns over an erosion of democratic rights and bread and butter economic issues. Poland faces its first recession since the end of communism because of the coronavirus pandemic fallout. The election was scheduled to be held in May but had to be postponed because of the virus outbreak.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- A Russian mining giant behind an enormous Arctic fuel spill last month said it had suspended workers at a metals plant who were responsible for pumping wastewater into nearby tundra. Norilsk Nickel cited a "flagrant violation of operating rules" in a statement announcing it had suspended employees responsible for dumping wastewater from a dangerously full reservoir into wildlife. The incident occurred at the Talnakh enrichment plant near the Arctic city of Norilsk, the company said, one month after the unprecedented fuel leak sparked a state of emergency declared by President Vladimir Putin. More than 21,000 tonnes of diesel leaked from a fuel storage tank at one of the company's subsidiary plants near Norilsk. The fuel seeped into the soil and dyed nearby waterways bright red.