

Thousands Rally in Berlin Against Far-Right AfD



Protesters demonstrate against the anti-immigration AfD becoming part of the German lower house of parliament Bundestag for the first time, in Berlin, October 22, 2017.

BERLIN (AFP) -- Thousands of demonstrators marched Sunday in Berlin, in protest against the far-right Alternative for Germany's debut in parliament next week.

Bearing posters with slogans like "Stop AfD," "My voice against incitement" or "My heart beats for diversity," the demonstrators rallied two days before AfD lawmakers will join other MPs at the

first sitting of Germany's newly-elected parliament.

The Islamophobic and anti-migrant AfD garnered 12.6% of the vote in the watershed general election in September and became the country's third biggest party.

Its arrival in the Bundestag is a political earthquake for post-war Germany, as the AfD's top figures have repeatedly smashed taboos with their claims on German identity

or by challenging Germany's culture of atonement over World War II.

But the party proved appealing to voters angry with Chancellor Angela Merkel's border policy, which allowed more than one million asylum seekers into the country since 2015.

Calling on people to join the protest on Sunday, the popular movement Campact urged Germans to "steal the show from the AfD."

"When the AfD sits in the Bundestag for the first time on October 24, it needs to know that our parliament is not a stage for racism, discrimination and falsifying history!" said Campact.

Teacher Annette Saidler acknowledged at the protest that "it's now too late" to stop the AfD from entering parliament.

"We can't do anything other than demonstrate, to say that there are still many people who did not vote for the AfD."

Another protester, 25-year-old university student Bastian Schmidt said he was at the demonstration to "call on parliamentary parties to protest in parliament against the AfD."

"But above all, the people who are here, wherever they are in their daily lives - in schools, universities or companies - must fight against racism," said Schmidt, who turned up with a group of like-minded schoolmates.

Hawkish Abe Sweeps to Victory in Japan Election



Japan's Prime Minister and ruling Liberal Democratic Party leader Shinzo Abe waves to his supporters in Tokyo while leaving his last stump speech ahead of the election on October 21, 2017.

TOKYO (AFP) — Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe swept to a comfortable victory in a snap election Sunday, handing him a mandate to harden his already hawkish stance on North Korea and re-energize the world's number-three economy.

Abe's conservative coalition was on track to win 311 seats in the 465-seat parliament, according to a projection published by private broadcaster TBS, putting the nationalist blue blood on course to become Japan's longest-serving leader.

Millions of Japanese braved torrential rain and driving winds to vote, as a typhoon bears down on the country with many heeding warnings to cast their ballots early.

Abe's Liberal Democratic Party benefited

from a weak and splintered opposition, with the two main parties facing him created only a matter of weeks ago.

Support for the Party of Hope founded by popular Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike fizzled after an initial blaze of publicity and was on track to win around 50 seats, the TBS projection suggested.

A new center-left Constitutional Democratic Party fared slightly better than expected but was still far behind Abe.

"The LDP's victory is simply because the opposition couldn't form a united front," political scientist Mikitaka Masuyama from the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, told AFP.

Despite the saber-rattling from North Korea, many voters said reviving the once-mighty

Japanese economy was the top priority, with Abe's trademark "Abenomics" policy failing to trickle down to the general public.

The three-pronged combination of ultra-loose monetary policy, huge government spending and structural reform has catapulted the stock market to a 21-year high but failed to stoke inflation and growth has remained sluggish.

Although voters turned out in their millions to back Abe, support for the 63-year-old is lukewarm and surveys showed his decision to call a snap election a year earlier than expected was unpopular.

Voter Etsuko Nakajima, 84, told AFP: "I totally oppose the current government. Morals collapsed. I'm afraid this country will be broken."

"I think if the LDP takes power, Japan will be in danger. He does not do politics for the people," added the pensioner.

Koike briefly promised to shake up Japan's sleepy political scene with her new party but she declined to run herself for a seat, sparking confusion over who would be prime minister if she won.

Italian Regions Vote in Referendum for Autonomy

MILAN (Reuters) -- Two wealthy regions of northern Italy voted Sunday in referendums for autonomy, ballots that could fan regional tensions in Europe at a time when neighboring Spain is striving to prevent Catalonia from breaking away.

Lombardy and Veneto, regions that are both run by the once openly secessionist Lega Nord party, were holding non-binding votes which the party hopes will deliver it a mandate to negotiate better financial deals from Rome.

Unlike the Spanish region of Catalonia, which held an independence referendum on Oct. 1 despite it being ruled unconstitutional, the Italian referendums are within the law.

Like Catalonia, Lombardy and Veneto complain they pay far more in taxes than they receive. Lombardy, home to financial hub Milan accounts for about 20% of Italy's economy - the euro zone's third-largest. Veneto, which includes the tourist magnet Venice, accounts for 10%.

"Lombardy and Veneto have two efficient administrations and public services work well, much better than in other Italian regions ... this is why I think it is worth asking for greater autonomy," said Massimo Piscetta, 49, who voted "Yes" in a small town outside Milan.

Lega Nord was established in the 1990s to campaign for an independent state of "Padania," stretching across Italy's north, from around Lombardy in the west to Venice in the east. It

'Czech Trump' Wins Polls as Europe Swings to Right



Czech billionaire Andrej Babis (C,R), chairman of the ANO movement (YES) kisses Marek Prchal, PR manager of ANO for social media at ANO headquarter after Czech elections in Prague on October 21, 2017.

PRAGUE (Dispatches) -- A billionaire populist dubbed the "Czech Trump" clinched victory in the Czech Republic's election on Saturday, while Eurosceptics and an anti-Islam group made strong gains.

Andrej Babis' anti-euro ANO (Yes) party won with 29.7% support (78 parliament seats), in a victory that represents a shift to the right for the country.

The party was followed by the anti-euro right-wing ODS party on 11.3% (25 seats). Turnout was at 60%. The figures are based on results from 99.9% of polling stations.

Since the president usually asks the leader of the strongest party in parliament's lower house to try to form a new government, Babis could be the country's next prime minister despite allegations of fraud linked to European Union subsidies and other scandals.

Despite the country's economic success, analysts say many Czechs who are heavily in debt or working long hours for low wages feel they have been left behind and are turning to populist, eurosceptic and far-right anti-EU parties to vent their ire.

Far-right and far-left anti-EU parties made gains in the fragmented vote that put nine parties into the 200-seat Czech parliament with few obvious coalition allies among them, something analysts warned could trigger instability, even chaos.

Babis insisted ANO was "pro-European" and did "not threaten democracy" in

a televised victory speech in which he also railed against a two-speed Europe, while inviting all parties in parliament for coalition talks.

But most parties appeared to shun the controversial billionaire, who was recently indicted on suspicion of EU subsidies fraud.

ODS leader Petr Fiala ruled out going into coalition with ANO, insisting it will not be able to deliver on its promises.

The anti-establishment Pirates led by Ivan Bartos made their debut in parliament, scoring 10.8% (22 seats) and coming in third. Bartos also ruled out teaming up with Babis.

The far-right Freedom and Free Democracy (SPD) party of Tokyo-born entrepreneur and lawmaker Tomio Okamura scored 10.6% (22 seats) support on strong anti-EU, anti-migrant and anti-Islam rhetoric, similar to surging far-right parties in neighboring Austria and Germany.

France's far-right National Front Marine Le Pen sent Okamura a message of support before the vote.

A 63-year-old Slovak-born chemicals, food and media tycoon, Babis has vowed to steer clear of the eurozone and echoes other eastern EU leaders who accuse Brussels of attempting to limit national sovereignty by imposing rules like migrant quotas.

He favors a united Europe and balks at talk of a "Czexit".



MOSCOW (AFP) -- Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny walked free Sunday after a 20-day jail term for organizing protests against President Vladimir Putin.

Navalny, who has declared his intention to stand for president in 2018, was released in a secret location in Moscow early Sunday to evade media attention. "Hi. I'm out," Navalny wrote on Instagram, posting a picture of himself on a street. A photographer working for his team later posted photographs of him meeting colleagues at the office of his anti-corruption foundation. During Navalny's time behind bars, the Kremlin race he hopes to contest has heated up with television star Ksenia Sobchak throwing in her hat. Navalny said he was "ready to work" and would meet supporters later Sunday in the southern city of Astrakhan at a rally timed for 1400 GMT. The event in the city 1,300 kilometers southeast of Moscow has permission from the authorities.

JAKARTA (Reuters) -- Indonesia intends to send a diplomatic note to the U.S. secretary of state and summon Washington's deputy ambassador in Jakarta to explain why the head of its military was denied entry to the United States, Indonesian officials said Sunday.

Armed Forces Commander Gen. Gatot Nurmantyo was about to board a flight on Saturday when the airline informed him that the U.S. Customs and Border Protection had denied him entry, military spokesman Wuryanto told a news conference in Jakarta. Nurmantyo was going to the United States at the invitation of General Joseph F. Dunford Jr., chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, to attend a Chiefs of Defense Conference on Countering Violent Extremism being held in Washington on Oct. 23-24. Wuryanto said. Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim-majority country, generally enjoys good ties with the United States.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter says he has offered to go to North Korea on behalf of the White House to try to allay rising tensions, but has not been asked, the New York Times reported Sunday.

"I would go, yes," Carter told the Times in an interview at his home when asked if he would go on such a trip for the Donald Trump administration. The 93-year-old Democrat, who was president from 1977 to 1981, said he had told the Republican president's National Security Advisor HR McMaster that he "was available if they ever need me." In 1994 Carter had traveled to Pyongyang to negotiate with Kim Il-sung, the current leader's grandfather, over the North's nuclear program, the Times said. In recent months President Trump has engaged in an escalating war of words with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, trading personal insults and threatening to "totally destroy" North Korea if it threatens the United States. Asked about the verbal attacks, Carter told the Times he is "afraid, too, of a situation." Calling Kim Jong-Un "unpredictable," Carter said he worried the young leader could take pre-emptive action.

KARACHI, Pakistan (AP) -- Pakistan's paramilitary force says it has killed eight alleged "terrorists" in an overnight shootout in Karachi.

A statement issued Sunday says that paramilitary Rangers along with counterterrorism police raided a house, triggering an hours-long shootout. It says five "terrorists" were killed inside the hideout while three others were wounded and later died on the way to a hospital. The statement says a counterterrorism officer and two paramilitary troops were wounded. It says two of the gunmen who were killed were identified as members of the Ansar al-Shariya militant group, and that weapons and explosives were seized from the hideout.

TOKYO (Reuters) -- Tens of thousands of people across Japan were advised to evacuate, hundreds of flights were cancelled and train services disrupted on election day Sunday as a typhoon roared towards the coast, bringing heavy rain and strong winds.

Typhoon Lan, classified as an intense Category 4 storm by the Tropical Storm Risk monitoring site, was south of Japan and moving northeast at 50 kph on Sunday night, speeding up slightly, the Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) said. Lan appeared to have weakened slightly from its peak, but it was still a powerful storm that could pound parts of Japan with more than 80 mm of rain an hour, an agency official told reporters. It was set to make landfall on Japan's main island of Honshu, possibly near Tokyo, early on Monday, at which time it is likely to have weakened to a Category 2 storm.

ADDIS ABABA (AP) -- Regional officials in Ethiopia say 11 people were killed in clashes in the restive Oromia region as the country continues to experience anti-government protests that at times lead to ethnic violence.

The Oromia and Amhara regional states spokesmen on Sunday issued statements after a week of unrest in Oromia that reportedly caused major business disruptions and the burning of several vehicles and properties in various locations. Addis Arega, spokesman of the Oromia region, said in a Facebook post Sunday that eight ethnic Oromos and three Amharas were killed in the Buno Bedele zone of the Oromia region. Spokesman for the Amhara region Nigusu Tilahun said on Sunday that in addition to the 11 killings properties were destroyed and citizens displaced.

Trump 'Most Dangerous President in U.S. History'

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- Democratic Chairman Tom Perez told fellow Democrats on Saturday that unity is crucial in the fight against President Donald Trump, whom he lambasted as an "existential threat" to the nation.

"We have the most dangerous president in American history and one of the most reactionary Congresses in American history," Perez said as he addressed the first Democratic National Committee gathering since his February election.

The former Obama Cabinet official blistered "a culture of corruption" that he said extends to Trump's Cabinet, House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, but he warned that internal ruckuses over party priorities and leadership could distract from the goal of winning more elections to upend Republicans' domination in Washington.

On Saturday, a White House official said Trump intends to spend at least \$430,000 of his own money to help

pay the legal bills of White House staff and campaign aides related to the investigations into alleged Russian election meddling in the 2016 election.

It was the first such commitment by Trump, who has dismissed the ongoing investigations into whether his campaign colluded with Russia as a "witch hunt" invented by Democrats to explain Hillary Clinton's loss.

Norman Eisen, an ethics lawyer in the Obama administration, said the offer "raises substantial questions under federal criminal law and federal ethics law", including whether it might be construed as part of an effort to glean more favorable testimony and whether current federal employees are even allowed to accept such gifts.

Trump and his aides have been racking up hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees as special counsel

Robert Mueller and House and Senate committees dig deeper into alleged Russia's role in the campaign.