

RULING PARTY WINS GEORGIA VOTE, OPPOSITION ALLEGES FRAUD

TBILISI, GEORGIA: The ruling Georgian Dream party won Georgia's parliamentary polls, early results showed yesterday, though accusations of vote fraud from the opposition sparked fears of political instability in the Caucasus nation.

Georgia's Western allies are watching closely to see if the strategic nation-praised as a rare example of democracy in the former Soviet region-can cement gains after its first transfer of power at the ballot box four years ago.

With votes from more than 82 percent of precincts counted, the central election commission said Georgian Dream was leading main opposition force the United National Movement (UNM) by 49.26 percent to 26.46 percent. For the first time in Georgia's post-Soviet history, a small pro-Russian party, Alliance of Patriots, received five percent of the vote needed to enter parliament. Western observers said polls were competitive though noted procedural problems during counting. After voting closed on Saturday the Georgian Dream was quick to declare victory based on exit polls which gave it a strong lead over the UNM. "This was a truly free and fair election, which firmly cements Georgia's democracy," Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said after the vote ended. But the UNM accused the government of attempts to "steal elections" and held a protest rally outside the central election commission. "Votes have been stolen from us. We will defend our votes," Nika Melia, chief of UNM's campaign and an MP candi-



TBILISI, GEORGIA: International observers from the OSCE, NATO, Council of Europe and European Parliament attend a press conference after Georgia's parliamentary election in Tbilisi yesterday. —AFP

date, told protesters. Most opposition parties, including Democratic Georgia, the Labour Party, and the State for People, also cried foul, accusing the government of "massive vote rigging."

Competitive elections

But international observers from the OSCE, NATO, Council of Europe and European Parliament said the elections "were competitive, well-administered and fundamental freedoms were generally respected." "The calm and open campaign atmosphere was, however, impacted by allegations of

unlawful campaigning and some incidents of violence," the monitors said in a joint statement. Ahead of the vote, election monitors and opposition politicians had noted that Georgia's electoral environment and financing give an unfair advantage to the ruling party, which could potentially affect the vote's outcome. Georgian Dream, led behind the scenes by billionaire ex-premier Bidzina Ivanishvili, and the UNM founded by exiled former president Mikheil Saakashvili, had been neck-and-neck in opinion polls ahead of the election. Politics is still dominated by Saakashvili and Ivanishvili even

though neither holds an official position.

The voting percentages that have so far been released are for a proportional ballot that will decide 77 of the 150 seats in the legislature. The figures may not necessarily be reflected in parliamentary seats because almost half will be determined on a first-past-the-post basis rather than by the proportional representation system. Due to the country's complex election rules the final makeup of the 150-seat parliament may only become clear by late November, after second round runoffs in most of the single-mandate constituencies.

Climate of hatred

Tensions rose ahead of the vote in the ex-Soviet republic-which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008 and seeks EU and NATO membership-after a car bombing and shooting incident at a rally. The campaign was marred by Wednesday's attempted murder of a UNM lawmaker whose car exploded in central Tbilisi, injuring four passers-by. The bombing prompted UNM to accuse authorities of "creating a climate of hatred in which opposition politicians are being attacked". It came after two men were injured when unknown assailants on Sunday fired shots during a campaign rally held by an independent candidate in the central city of Gori.

The poisonous atmosphere around the polarised vote follows years of what the opposition sees as political witch hunts and retribution against Saakashvili and his team. — AFP

MANHUNT FOR GERMAN BOMB PLOT SUSPECT; 1 MAN IN CUSTODY

22-YEAR-OLD SYRIAN IDENTIFIED

BERLIN: German police searched nationwide yesterday for a 22-year-old Syrian man believed to have been preparing a bombing attack, who slipped through their fingers as they were closing in on him, and were questioning a second Syrian man on suspicion he was involved in the plot. The man in custody was one of three apprehended in the eastern city of Chemnitz on Saturday. He was the renter of the apartment that police raided in their search for the main suspect, Jaber Albakr from the Damascus area of Syria, Saxony police spokesman Tom Bernhardt told The Associated Press. The other two men

have been released. He said the man in custody was Albakr's "countryman" but would not give other details. "We believe he is a possible co-conspirator," Bernhardt said. On Saturday morning, as police prepared to raid the apartment building, Albakr was observed leaving the premises. Police fired a warning shot but were unable to stop him, Bernhardt said, confirming German media reports. They thought he had turned back into the building but was not the case, he said.

Entered with migrants

Bernhardt also confirmed reports that Albakr

had come to Germany in the flood of 890,000 migrants who entered the country in 2015 and had been granted asylum. Nobody was in the apartment when police SWAT teams blew down the door Saturday, but investigators found "several hundred grams" of a volatile explosive hidden in the flat, enough to cause significant damage, Bernhardt said. "With this highly volatile explosive, even a few hundred grams is no trifle," he said. "For an explosive of this type, it was a considerable amount."

He said experts were still trying to determine whether it was the same explosive used in the deadly Nov. 13 attacks in Paris and the March 22 attacks in Brussels known as TATP, or triacetone triperoxide. "It's comparable to that," he said. TATP has been used in many attacks over the years, and is favored by violent extremists because it's fairly easy to make and detonate.

The explosives were destroyed Saturday in a controlled detonation by bomb squad experts in a pit dug outside the five-story apartment building because they were considered too dangerous to transport. The raid came after Saxony police were given a tip from Germany's domestic intelligence service that Albakr may be planning an attack. He had been on the agency's radar, but Bernhardt said it was not clear how long.

German media have reported that Albakr is believed to be connected to Islamic extremist groups, but Saxony police have not commented on his possible motivation or the bomb plot's target.

Germany has been on edge since two attacks this summer claimed by the Islamic State in which multiple people were injured and both assailants died. Two other attacks unrelated to Islamic extremism, including a deadly mall shooting in Munich, have also contributed to fears.

Federal police have increased security around the country, particularly around "critical infrastructure" like train stations and airports, as authorities search for Albakr. —AP



CHEMNITZ, GERMANY: Police officers leave an apartment after detonations in the eastern city on Saturday. —AP



BISHOFTU, ETHIOPIA: This file photo taken on October 2, 2016 shows residents of Bishoftu crossing their wrists above their heads as a symbol for the Oromo anti-government protesting movement during the Oromo new year holiday Irreechaa. —AFP

ETHIOPIA DECLARES STATE OF EMERGENCY

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopia declared a state of emergency yesterday following months of violent anti-government protests, according to an official statement. "The state of emergency was declared following a thorough discussion by the Council of Ministers on the loss of lives and property damages occurring in the country," Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn said.

The declaration marks a further hardening of the government's position after months of protests in different parts of the country which have been met with a strong

security response that has left hundreds dead, according to human rights groups.

"We put our citizens' safety first. Besides, we want to put an end to the damage that is being carried out against infrastructure projects, health centers, administration and justice buildings," he said on state media.

Ethiopia is facing its biggest anti-government unrest in a decade, from the majority Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups which feel marginalized by a minority-led government. —AFP



MOSCOW: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (R) and his French counterpart Jean-Marc Ayrault arrive for a joint press conference following their meeting in Moscow on October 6, 2016. —AFP

RUSSIA SAYS US ACTIONS THREATEN IT'S SECURITY

MOSCOW: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday he had detected increasing US hostility towards Moscow and complained about what he said was a series of aggressive US steps that threatened Russia's national security.

In an interview with Russian state TV likely to worsen already poor relations with Washington, Lavrov made it clear he blamed the Obama administration for what he described as a sharp deterioration in US-Russia ties. "We have witnessed a fundamental change of circumstances when it comes to the aggressive Russophobia that now lies at the heart of US policy towards Russia," Lavrov told Russian state TV's First Channel. "It's not just a rhetorical Russophobia, but aggressive steps that really hurt our national interests and pose a threat to our security."

With relations between Moscow and Washington strained over issues from Syria to Ukraine, Lavrov reeled off a long list of Russian grievances against the United States which he said helped contribute to an atmosphere of mistrust that was in some ways more dangerous and unpredictable than the Cold War.

He complained that NATO had been

steadily moving military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders and lashed out at Western sanctions imposed over Moscow's role in the Ukraine crisis. He also said he had heard that some policy makers in Washington were suggesting that President Barack Obama sanction the carpet bombing of the Syrian government's military air fields to ground its air force.

"This is a very dangerous game given that Russia, being in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate government of this country and having two bases there, has got air defense systems there to protect its assets," said Lavrov.

Lavrov said he hoped Obama would not agree to such a scenario. Russia suspended a treaty with Washington on cleaning up weapons grade plutonium earlier this month in response to what it said were "unfriendly acts" by the United States. Lavrov said both countries had the right to pull out of the treaty in the event of "a fundamental change in circumstances".

"The treaty was concluded when relations were normal, civilized, when no one ... was trying to interfere in the (other's) internal affairs. That's the fundamental change of circumstances," said Lavrov. —Reuters

POPE NAMES 17 CARDINALS: 3 OF THEM US MODERATES

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis named 17 new cardinals yesterday - three of them American moderates, including Chicago Archbishop Blase Cupich and Indianapolis Archbishop Joseph Tobin - in a clear signal to the conservative US church hierarchy that he values pastors focused more on mercy than morals.

Tobin's nomination also carries a political message, given that he openly opposed a request from Indiana Gov. Michael Pence, now the Republican running mate of presidential candidate Donald Trump, to not settle Syrian refugees in the state. Thirteen of the new cardinals, including all the Americans, are under age 80 and thus eligible to vote in any future conclave to elect Francis' successor.

As is Francis' tradition, the new cardinals hail from some of the most far-flung and peripheral corners of the globe, with Africa, Asia, South

America and Oceania getting far more representation in this round than Europe, which has long dominated the College of Cardinals. Despite the new nominations, though, Europe still has the most voting-age cardinals with 54.

New "princes" of the church include bishops from Bangui, Central African Republic; Port Louis, Mauritius and Tlalampantla, Mexico. In all, seven countries that have never had a cardinal are getting one in this, Francis' third batch of red-hatted churchmen.

Significantly only one Italian elector was named: Francis' ambassador to "the beloved and martyred Syria," Cardinal-elect Mario Zenari. The third American, Cardinal-elect Kevin Farrell, the outgoing bishop of Dallas, was an expected nomination. Francis in August named him to head the big new Vatican department for laity, family and life issues.

Elevation on Nov 19

Speaking at the end of a special Mass on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica, Francis said the 17 would be elevated at a consistory on Nov 19, on the eve of the close to his Holy Year of Mercy. "Their provenance from 11 nations expresses the universality of the church that announces and is witness to the good news of the mercy of God in every corner of the world," Francis said.

Their elevation will bring the number of voting-age cardinals to 120 by the end of November, the maximum allowed under current rules. With the non-voting cardinals included, the college by that time will number 228.

With Sunday's appointees, Francis will have appointed 44 cardinal electors and 11 non-electors. Of the new cardinals, Cupich is very much a pastor in Francis' likeness, emphasizing the merciful and welcoming side of the church - somewhat to the dismay of US conservative Catholics. His nomination as Chicago archbishop was Francis' first major US appointment and he was a papal appointee at the pope's big family synod last year. The nomination for Tobin is significant both for the US church and the US election and reflects Francis' ongoing concern for refugees. A US federal appeals court recently used stinging language in a ruling that will keep Pence from barring Syrian refugee resettlement in Indiana for now. Trump, the Republican nominee for president and Pence's running mate, has proposed deporting millions of immigrants and banning the entry of Muslims from other countries. "You can find a political message" in the Tobin appointment, said Massimo Faggioli, a Villanova University expert on the Vatican. Tobin's nomination could also indicate Francis' appreciation of his support for American nuns. Tobin had been the No. 2 in the Vatican office for religious orders for only two years when in 2012, then-Pope Benedict XVI sent him back to the US to head the Indianapolis archdiocese, which has fewer than 230,000 parishioners. The transfer was seen in some Vatican circles as being tied to Tobin's efforts to promote dialogue and resolve tensions between the Vatican and US nuns who were subject of two separate Holy See investigations at the time. — AP



VATICAN: Pope Francis celebrates a jubilee mass in St. Peter's Square yesterday. —AP