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ISTANBUL: Supporters of Muharrem Ince, presidential candidate of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), hold a giant Turkish flag during an election rally in Istanbul. — AFP

# Turkey's Erdogan, main rival stage final election rallies

## Erdogan seeking sweeping new executive powers

ISTANBUL: President Tayyip Erdogan and his main challenger, Muharrem Ince, made a final push for support at rival rallies in Istanbul yesterday, a day before presidential and parliamentary elections widely viewed as the most crucial in Turkey for decades. The winner of today's presidential contest will acquire sweeping new executive powers under a constitutional overhaul backed by Erdogan and endorsed last year by a narrow majority of Turks in a referendum.

Erdogan, who has dominated Turkish politics for 15 years, first as prime minister and since 2014 as president, praised the executive presidency that comes into force after the election. "God willing, Turkey will start flying with this system... With this system, we will achieve what others cannot imagine," he told

tens of thousands of supporters at a rally in Istanbul's Esenyurt district, the first of five planned for yesterday. Erdogan, 64, also promised to deliver more of the big infrastructure projects that have characterised his time in power and helped make him the most popular - if also the most divisive - leader of modern Turkish history. But with Turkey's economic woes mounting, partly due to the lira currency's sharp decline, Erdogan and his ruling, Islamist-rooted AK Party, are facing an unexpectedly strong challenge from a revitalized opposition.

### Opposition appeal

Ince, a former teacher and the presidential candidate of the main opposition party, the secularist Republican People's Party

(CHP), has proved highly effective on the campaign trail, drawing huge crowds, especially in the big cities. Yesterday police said at least one million people had turned out in Istanbul's Maltepe district to hear Ince promise to reverse - if he wins the presidency - what he sees as Turkey's turn towards more authoritarian rule under Erdogan.

Ince also repeated his accusation - made by other opposition politicians too - of political bias by Turkey's state media, which has given Erdogan and the AK Party heavy coverage while often neglecting to broadcast opposition rallies. "There are 5 million people in Maltepe right now but none of the TV channels can show it," he said. That figure could not be independently verified, though images circulating on social media

showed vast crowds of people assembled to hear Ince speak. "Let this immorality be an example to the world," said Ince, who said he had held 107 rallies around Turkey in the 51 days since his candidacy was announced. Braving a summer thunderstorm, Ince's supporters, in festive mood, sang anthems and waved red and white Turkish flags. On the other side of the Bosphorus, the waterway bisecting Istanbul and separating Europe from Asia, Erdogan dismissed fears of any ballot-rigging on Sunday, saying the polls would be fair and safe. "We have taken all security precautions," said Erdogan. Opposition parties and non-governmental organizations say they plan to deploy more than half a million monitors and volunteers at ballot boxes across Turkey on Sunday to prevent fraud. — Reuters

## Split families in limbo amid Trump immigration chaos

EL PASO: The fate of 2,300 children wrested from their parents at the US border with Mexico remained unclear Friday two days after Donald Trump ordered an end to migrant family separations, as the president accused Democrats of spinning "phony" tales of suffering for electoral gain. While the US leader bowed to global outrage over the splitting of families, conflicting messages were contributing to a sense of chaos in the handling of the crisis.

Government agencies were unable to say what would happen to the children already sent to tent camps and other facilities spread across the country while their parents were charged with immigration offenses. Having been forced into a climbdown on the hot-button issue of immigration, Trump swung back into fighting mode-insisting he remained committed to the "zero tolerance" policy that aims to deter the flow of migrants from Central America.

"We must maintain a Strong Southern Border. We cannot allow our Country to be overrun by illegal immigrants as the Democrats tell their phony stories of sadness and grief, hoping it will help them in the elections," he tweeted. In a possible indication of the scope of the crackdown the Trump administration envisions, Time magazine reported that the US Navy is preparing

plans to build detention centers for tens of thousands of immigrants on remote bases in support of the "zero tolerance" policy.

Trump also met at the White House with parents of victims killed by undocumented immigrants. The parents standing with Trump have been "permanently separated from their loved ones," the president said, "because they were killed by criminal illegal aliens." Trump continued to make political hay out of the crisis, accusing Democrats of "playing games" and not supporting tougher border policies. To fellow Republicans, his message was to "stop wasting their time on Immigration" until after the November midterm congressional elections.

On Thursday, divided congressional Republicans failed to pass one immigration reform bill, and a second proposal that includes language ending family separations was put off until next week. While Melania Trump sought to demonstrate concern with a surprise visit to migrant children at the border on Thursday, the administration remained under siege amid continued accounts of parents unable to find their children and no system in place for reuniting them.

Lawyers working to reunite families said they were struggling to navigate a labyrinthine process. "It's very difficult to reunite children with their parents because

these government agencies were not prepared, and they're not designed, for family separation," said Efrén Olivares, a lawyer with the Texas Civil Rights Project that represents 381 migrant parents.

### 'How is she?'

Near Washington, protestors shouting "Shame!" demonstrated early Friday outside the home of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, two days after Trump announced her department would take over the handling and processing of families at the border. Some reunifications were taking place, though it was unclear whether they involved the 700 children taken from parents between October and April, or the 2,300 since the mandatory prosecution of illegal border-crossers, whose children were taken away as a result, began in early May.

Others remained in painful limbo. One woman, Cindy Madrid from El Salvador, repeatedly dictated her US-resident sister's phone number to her six-year-old daughter before she crossed the border and the family was separated. The child was one of those heard crying out-and reciting the number-in an audio recording reportedly made inside a detention center, which galvanized opposition to the separations.

"It's maddening because at every moment I ask myself, 'How is she? Has she eaten? Are they taking care of her? Do they shower her?'" Madrid told CNN Thursday from a detention center in Port Isabel, Texas. "There are many more rooms full of women going through the same thing," she said. —AFP

## Zimbabwe's President unhurt after blast at rally

HARARE: Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa escaped unhurt after an explosion rocked a stadium where he was addressing a political rally yesterday, a month before the country is due to hold its presidential elections. However, vice presidents Constantino Chiwenga and Kembo Mohadi and a minister sustained minor injuries following the blast at the White City Stadium in the second city of Bulawayo.

"There has been an incident at Bulawayo where the president was addressing a rally. This is now a police issue but the president is safe at Bulawayo State House," spokesman George Charamba told Reuters. "We are still to get information on what exactly happened as we understand that some people could have been injured as this happened in the VIP tent." National Police spokeswoman Charity Charamba said she did not have details on the incident. Several security personnel were also injured, the state-owned Herald newspaper said. Footage from Zimbabwe state television showed the explosion took place near Mnangagwa as he waved to supporters. He was later seen in pictures circulating on social media visiting Chiwenga's wife in hospital. Mnangagwa was speaking at his first rally in Bulawayo, an opposition stronghold where the ruling ZANU-PF has not won in national elections since 2000.

Zimbabwe holds its presidential election on July 30, with 75-year-old Mnangagwa and 40-year-old Nelson Chamisa, the leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change,



BULAWAYO: Zimbabwe President Emmerson Mnangagwa addresses a ruling ZANU-PF party rally in Bulawayo yesterday as he campaigns for votes ahead of nationwide elections due on July 30. — AFP

the main contenders. The vote next month is the first since Robert Mugabe's downfall after a de facto military coup last November. Unlike previous elections which were marred by violence, mostly against opposition members by ZANU-PF supporters, the run up to this year's vote has been relatively peaceful.

Mnangagwa has promised a free and fair vote and if it is endorsed by international observers who are in the country for the first time since 2000, it could help Zimbabwe secure funding from international institutions for the first time in two decades. — Reuters