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ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addresses his supporters during a rally yesterday. —AFP

# Erdogan vows more cross-border offensives

## AKP releases election manifesto before snap polls

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday vowed to launch further cross-border offensives against terror groups as he revealed his ruling party's manifesto ahead of snap elections on June 24. Erdogan made a series of promises about the economy and uniting the country during a rally in Istanbul attended by several thousand people. The Turkish head of state last month announced snap presidential and parliamentary elections on June 24 to the surprise of Turkish politics observers.

Experts say Erdogan wants to exploit the rising nationalist feeling after an operation in Syria this year and to hold polls before the economy worsens. After June 24, Turkey will implement constitutional changes approved in an April 2017 referendum to create an executive presidency which expands the head of state's powers. Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 and has since remained the country's biggest political force. "June 24 is going to be a milestone for Turkey," Erdogan said.

The president said Turkey would launch cross-border offensives, similar to previous military operations in Syria, adding that Turkey would never give up its fight against terror. "Turkey will launch additional offensives

like Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations to clear its border of terror organizations in the new era," Erdogan said. Operation Euphrates Shield took place between August 2016 and March 2017 against the Islamic State group, while the Olive Branch offensive targeted the People's Protection Units (YPG) militia in its western enclave of Afrin earlier this year.

### Turkey committed to EU

The president did not give any details on where the next operation could take place although there has been speculation Ankara could launch an offensive in northern Iraq. Turkey says the YPG is linked to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been waging an insurgency inside Turkey since 1984. The PKK has bases in the Qandil mountain area of Iraq. Erdogan also repeatedly threat-

ened in the past to expand the Afrin offensive to YPG-held Manbij, which raised fears of a confrontation with United States forces there.

During his 70-minute speech, Erdogan discussed a range of domestic and foreign issues. He repeated Turkey's commitment to joining the European Union despite prior tensions with several EU member states and long-stalled membership negotiations. Erdogan highlighted the AKP's success in starting formal membership talks in 2005. "We have absolutely not given up our objective of full membership of the European Union even if we have not seen the same determination and desire recently from our interlocutors," he insisted.

Erdogan said interest rates - despite the Turkish lira's decline in value against the US dollar - would fall

alongside inflation and the widening current account deficit.

Inflation hit 10.85 per cent in April while the lira has lost over 11 percent of its value against the greenback since January.

### 'Media embargo'

Erdogan's speech was broadcast live on all the main television channels but the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate Muharrem Ince, chosen two days earlier, hit back at the "media embargo" against the opposition. Ince's first rally in Yalova, north-western Turkey, was not broadcast live on Saturday by the main news channels including CNN Turk and state broadcaster TRT. "The TV channels which even broadcast AKP's district congresses live did not broadcast our splendid rally live," Ince said on Twitter earlier yesterday, blaming Erdogan. "We will go on to break this media order. If the media embargo against the opposition at the orders of the palace continues, we will hold our rallies outside TV channels." In recent months, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim and Erdogan have given speeches to district-level party congresses each weekend which have always been broadcast live. —AFP



## Turkey committed to joining EU

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## First-time voters eager to weigh in on Lebanon's poll

BEIRUT: Hanin Terjman was among the first outside her Beirut polling station yesterday: like many young Lebanese, she is voting for the first time and wants to see new faces in parliament. Clicking away on her smart phone, the chic 21-year-old student waited nervously for the school-turned-polling station in the Ras Al-Nabah district to open for Lebanon's first parliamentary elections in nine years. She was surrounded by delegates from the country's elite parties, who sported hats with pictures of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and T-shirts in support of the rival powerful Shiite Amal Movement. But Terjman wants to throw her support behind a list of outsiders including engineers and activists.

"We're in a country whose rulers are putting pressure on us over who we are going to vote for. We should vote for new people who are going to change," she said. Terjman, who became of age to vote just one month ago, is among 800,000 registered voters - more than a fifth of the electorate - who were too young to cast a ballot in previous polls. "It's nice to feel like I belong to my country," she said, donning a pink top, white headscarf, and thick black eyeliner. Terjman, who studies education at the Lebanese University, said she will vote for the civil society list Kulluna Beirut, despite being told by friends that veteran politicians would not be easily unseated.

"I want to tell people to go vote for the person they think is appropriate and will improve their country, not people who 'belong' to, because that won't get you anywhere." As she spoke, half a dozen supporters of Hariri's Future Movement rushed to the school gate, waving ID cards and asking the soldier positioned there when they could be let in. Beirut is split into two voting districts, with 19 seats up for grabs for candidates from Christian and Muslim sects. Many powerful politicians, including Hariri, are



BEIRUT: Lebanese women voters queue in line to cast their votes at a polling station in the capital Beirut yesterday, as the country votes in the first parliamentary election in nine years. —AFP

running in Beirut, where massive posters of the rival candidates are omnipresent.

### First timers

Lebanon elected 128 members to parliament in 2009, but a planned 2013 vote was delayed because of discontent with the majoritarian electoral law and concerns about a spillover from the war in neighboring Syria. Ali al-Ahmad, 21, came to the Ras Al-Nabah station with a friend just moments after polls opened. "It's the first time for me, and we're excited. A lot of people told me not to vote," said Ahmad, who wore a black tee-shirt. He said he would support candidates from the Shiite movement Hezbollah, which is backing the Damascus regime in the Syria war, and which many analysts say would likely hold on to its seats. "Just as we were on the front lines and barricades, we'll be behind the ballot boxes, we want a strong country with a strong economy," said Ahmad. Supporters of candidates running in Sunday's race were distributing boxed breakfasts at decked-out stands near polling stations. Many young voters came holding their

elderly relatives, guiding them into the polling stations and trying to explain the new, more proportional electoral system to them. Siwar Ibrahim came alone. He is registered to vote in the Tariq al-Jdideh district, a built-up and conservative neighborhood where Hariri's party has strong support. "It's my first time and I hope I don't get disappointed. I turned 21 on January 1," said Ibrahim, a curly-haired visual artist, as he stood in line to head into the booth.

He said he turned down cash payments from traditional parties, instead opting for Kulluna Beirut. Ibrahim, who dreams of legislation that would back gender minorities, health care and human rights, said coming into the packed polling station felt threatening. "I had to dress the opposite of what I usually look like in order to come here to vote safely. I had to take my earrings out, I had to look like what a man is supposed to look like," he said. "I'm here, at least I tried. I don't want to spend four years at home regretting that I didn't vote." "It's ok to be scared, that's the challenge. Be scared, and vote." —AFP

## A new hope for young Armenians; opposition hero set to take power

YEREVAN: The audience goes crazy in the Armenian capital Yerevan's Downtown Club as rapper Narek goes on stage. "How is it going, Armenia, a nation of winners?" he exclaims. His fans are jubilant. On Tuesday, their hero, opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan could ascend to power after three weeks of peaceful protests that ousted longtime leader Serzh Sargsyan last month. "Armenians! Armenians!" shouts Narek before starting to sing a rap song about an everyday life in the streets of Yerevan.

For one of his fans, Eduard Eghoyan, the hit song is a call for "hope" despite a litany of problems in the poor ex-Soviet country of 2.9 million people. "This rap comes from the depths of our souls and speaks of our hardships," said the young IT engineer. "Armenia's biggest problem today is corruption". The small South Caucasus nation ranks 107th out of 180 countries in the Transparency International's corruption perception index. Another fan, Karen Vardanyan, likes Narek's lyrics but was forced to skip the concert at the Downtown Club.

"The ticket costs 10,000 drams (17 euros), it's too expensive," he said. The 23-year-old web designer said he earns 175,000 drams (300 euros) a month and has to pay 260,000 drams in tuition fees every year. "And I'm enrolled in a public university!" he fumed. Like most Armenians, Eghoyan and Vardanyan pin their hopes on the 42-year-old leader of the opposition movement, Pashinyan. The only candidate for the country's top political office, Pashinyan is expected to be elected prime minister by lawmakers on Tuesday after a huge wave of opposition protests against the ruling elites shook the country in recent weeks. "There is no alternative (to Pashinyan) and I expect a lot from him," said Vardanyan.

### 'The only one'

Sporting a tousled beard, a bronze tan and a baseball cap, Armenia's political supereva has channelled people's desire for change into a broad protest movement which led to the resignation of veteran leader Sargsyan last month and transformed the country's political landscape. Pashinyan has built his popularity on promises to tackle widespread poverty, oust corrupt elites and reign in powerful oligarchs that wield massive influence over Armenian politics. Tens of thousands of Pashinyan supporters for several weeks rallied in Yerevan and other cities and last week virtually shut down the capital after the ruling Republican Party blocked Pashinyan's first attempt to get elected prime minister. Pashinyan called for a halt to protests after the Republicans gave in and said they would back the opposition leader's candidacy after a nationwide general strike cut key transport links and suspended railway traffic.

Ahead of the crucial vote, life in Yerevan, a city with a population of one million people and a provincial feel, was back to normal, with posters virtually gone from the streets and residents seeking refuge from the blistering sun. Lectures resumed at Yerevan State University after students took to the streets en masse, blockading entrances to government buildings and disrupting traffic across the city. Sirarpi Ohanyan, a 22-year-old international relations student, said she was confident in the outcome of the vote. Pashinyan "is the only one who can make Armenia win," she said. —AFP