

# Australian prime minister sets election for May 18

## Morrison's govt releases budget, tax cuts to woo voters

**SYDNEY:** Australia's prime minister yesterday called a national election for May 18, firing the starting gun on what promises to be a bare-knuckle campaign focused heavily on climate and the economy. The vote will decide whether the conservative government gets a rare third term in office—and whether embattled incumbent Scott Morrison can beat the odds and hang on to power. Polls have consistently shown his centre-left Labor opponents with a commanding lead, suggesting a new administration led by former union leader Bill Shorten.

But Australian elections are often tight affairs, with a couple dozen marginal seats deciding the outcome, and both party leaders have low approval ratings and have struggled to connect with voters. Morrison took office less than a year ago in a coup by the hard right of his Liberal party and has struggled to bridge a divide between party moderates and nationalist populists who have grown in confidence in the age of Donald Trump. He has tried to paper over these divisions and make sure the campaign focus is squarely on the party's economic record.

"We live in the best country in the world," Morrison said making the election announcement in Canberra. "Our future depends on a strong economy." "Who do you trust to deliver that strong economy?" he asked. For all purposes, campaigning is already well underway and has already been deeply acrimonious. Election ads have been running for weeks, and like the United States-Australian politics has taken on the air of a permanent campaign with the focus on how policies will play with voters as much as how well they work.

Last week Morrison's minority government released a prospective budget replete with tax cuts designed to woo voters and the first budget

surplus in more than a decade. Since then, any opportunity in front of a camera or microphone has been an opportunity to repeat the claim that a high-tax Labor government would destroy jobs and businesses. In truth, after 27 years of growth, the Australian economy is facing increasing headwinds, and whoever wins power is likely to contend with slower growth, rising unemployment, falling revenues and wobbly housing and commodities markets.

### Preparing for battle

Labor for its part has zeroed in on centrist voters frustrated that they elected a moderate in former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull only for the Liberals to swap horses midstream to the more hardline Morrison. Shorten has tried to paint his opponents as culturally out of touch and promised the coal-rich country will shift to electric cars and renewable energy. "This election is very straightforward," he said. "It is about being stuck in the past or a bright future and a positive view of what Australians can do together."

"What we need to do is make sure this country is working in the interests of everyone, not just the top end of town." The 50-year-old prime minister's policies on climate change and immigration are deeply unpopular, but coalition partners and hardliners within his party have forestalled any shift to the centre. The environment is not just an issue in the wealthy suburbs. Farms—always hard to run on the country's difficult soil and in its unforgiving climate—now have to contend with record droughts, followed by brutal bushfires, followed by record floods.

But Morrison will be hoping that conservative rural voters, urban voters frustrated with more crowded and more expensive cities and a



CANBERRA: Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison speaks at a press conference at the Parliament House in Canberra.—AFP

combative campaign can carry him over the line. His fate may hinge on the ability of the Liberal party and Australia's powerful conservative media to paint Shorten as untrustworthy.

Minor parties may also play a significant role, thanks to Australia's system of compulsory ranked votes.

A crop of centrist independent women candidates have done well in recent by-elections, while running a message of unapologetic multiculturalism and action on climate change. Revelations that Pauline Hanson's far-right One Nation party offered to change Australia's popular gun restrictions in return for millions of dollars from the US National Rifle Association could also have a major impact. Following the

scandal Morrison reluctantly told Liberal voters to award their crucial second preference votes to Labor above Hanson, a move that could boost Labor and see him lose One Nation votes.

But Morrison's party has been buoyed by a surprise victory in recent regional elections in the populous state of New South Wales. Party members "are sounding more confident about New South Wales and Queensland at least" for the general election, said William Bowe, editor of the Poll Bludger blog. "They are also more hopeful of at least limiting their losses in Western Australia." "But Victoria remains a nightmare for them, looking so bad as to preclude any winning scenario that doesn't involve them hanging on as an unstable minority government." —AFP

## S Korea's Moon to meet Trump hoping to revive N Korea talks

**WASHINGTON:** South Korean President Moon Jae-in will meet US President Donald Trump hoping to help put denuclearization talks with North Korea back on track after a failed summit between the United States and North Korean leaders in February. Moon arrived in Washington late on Wednesday and is due to hold talks with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Trump's national security adviser John Bolton and Vice President Mike Pence on Thursday morning before meeting the president at the White House shortly after midday.

Ahead of his trip, aides to Moon stressed the need to revive US-North Korea talks as soon as possible after a second summit between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un collapsed in Hanoi on Feb. 28. The White House has said Trump and Moon will discuss North Korea and bilateral issues, but US officials have declined to provide details. Moon has put his po-

litical reputation on the line in encouraging negotiations between the United States and North Korea aimed at persuading Kim to give up a nuclear weapons program that now threatens the United States.

Moon has stressed the need to offer North Korea concessions to encourage negotiations, but Washington appears to have hardened its position against a phased approach sought by Pyongyang in which gradual steps would be rewarded with relief from punishing sanctions. The Hanoi meeting collapsed amid conflicting demands by North Korea for sanctions relief and US insistence on its complete denuclearization.

On Thursday, North Korean state media said Kim had told a meeting of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea on Wednesday that he would push forward with efforts to make the economy more self-sufficient "so as to deal a telling blow to the hostile forces who go with bloodshot eyes miscalculating that sanctions can bring (North Korea) to its knees." Last month, a senior North Korean official warned that Kim might rethink a moratorium on missile launches and nuclear tests in place since 2017 unless Washington makes concessions such as easing economic sanctions.

Officials in Seoul were shocked by the breakdown of the Hanoi summit and some South Korean officials blame the influence of Bolton, a hardliner who has long advocated a tough approach to North Korea. —Reuters

## NZ police arrest Trump fan over mosque abuse

**WELLINGTON:** New Zealand police yesterday arrested a man spotted in a "Trump" tee-shirt hurling abuse at worshippers outside one of the Christchurch mosques where dozens were killed in a massacre last month. Police said the 33-year-old man had "shaken" the Muslim community late Wednesday at the Al Noor mosque by shouting abuse at people. "Our community has no tolerance for those who target or victimize others because of their identity, and nor does police," Canterbury district commander superintendent John Price said in a statement Wednesday.

"This is especially so for members of our Muslim community who are already dealing with so much," he added. The man described as being "of solid build with short dark hair and a tattoo on his left shoulder/neck area", walked off into the park opposite the mosque after the incident, but was later apprehended. Australian Brenton Tarrant, 28, a self-avowed white supremacist, has been charged with 50 counts of murder and 39 of attempted murder over the Christchurch twin mosque attacks.—AFP