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TUNIS: Tunisian voters fill their ballots for presidential election at a polling station in Ben Arous near the capital yesterday. (INSET) Ennahdha's presidential candidate Abdelfattah Mourou casts his ballot for presidential election at a polling station in La Marsa on the outskirts of the capital Tunis. — AFP

Tunisia votes in presidential contest

Voters remain undecided, due to shifting political landscape

TUNIS: Rarely has the outcome of an election been so uncertain in Tunisia, the cradle and partial success story of the Arab Spring, as some seven million voters head to the polls yesterday to choose from a crowded field. Key players include media mogul Nabil Karoui, behind bars due to an ongoing money laundering probe, Abdelfattah Mourou, who heads a first-time bid for Islamist-inspired party Ennahdha, and Prime Minister Youssef Chahed.

The premier's popularity has been tarnished by a sluggish economy and a high cost of living, and he has found himself having to vehemently deny accusations that Karoui's detention since late August is politically inspired. Some 13,000 polling booths opened across Tunisia at 8:00 am yesterday, with two dozen candidates vying for a five-year mandate.

The election follows an intense campaign characterized more by personality clashes than political differences. It had been brought forward by the death in July of 92-year-old president Beji Caid Essebsi, whose widow also passed away yesterday morning. Essebsi had been elected in the wake of the 2011 revolt that overthrew former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Publication of opinion polls has officially been banned

since July, but one thing appears certain: many voters remain undecided, due to the difficulty of reading a shifting political landscape. "I am undecided between two candidates—I will decide in the polling booth," smiled one voter, Sofiene, who added: "honest candidates don't have much chance of winning." Prime Minister Chahed, after casting his vote, said he was "proud of this great event".

"The world is watching. By tonight or tomorrow, Tunisia will be in good hands," he added. Some hopefuls have tried to burnish anti-establishment credentials to distance themselves from a political elite discredited by personal quarrels. One key newcomer is Kais Saied, a 61-year-old law professor and expert on constitutional affairs, who has avoided attaching his bid to a political party. Instead, he has gone door-to-door to drum up support for his conservative platform.

Last minute withdrawals

Another independent candidate is Defence Minister Abdelkarim Zbidi, a technocrat who is running for the first time. However, he has the backing of Essebsi's Nidaa Tounes party. The long list of candidates was cut slightly by the last-minute withdrawal of two candidates in

favour of Zbidi: former political adviser Mohsen Marzouk and businessman Slim Riahi. But Karoui's detention, just 10 days ahead of the start of campaigning, has been the top story of the election.

Studies suggest his arrest boosted his popularity. A controversial businessman, Karoui built his appeal by using his Nessma television channel to launch charity campaigns, handing out food aid to some of the country's poorest. But his detractors portray him as a would-be Silvio Berlusconi, the former Italian premier who they allege partly owns his channel. On Friday, an appeal for the Tunisian mogul's release from prison ahead of the election was rejected, his party and lawyers said, two days after his defense team announced he was on a hunger strike. The polarization risks derailing the electoral process, according to Michael Ayari, an analyst for the International Crisis Group.

Divisive candidates

Isabelle Werenfels, a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, has called the vote a democratic "test" because "it may require accepting the victory of a polarising candidate"

such as Karoui. Distrust of the political elite has been deepened by an unemployment rate of 15 percent and a rise in the cost of living by close to a third since 2016. Jihadist attacks have exacted a heavy toll on the key tourism sector.

Some 70,000 security agents will be deployed on Sunday, including 50,000 focused solely on polling stations, according to the interior ministry. Some stations will remain open until 6:00 pm, while others will close two hours earlier, for security reasons. Overseas voting stations for Tunisia's sizeable expatriate population have been open since Friday. Exit polls are expected overnight Sunday into Monday, but preliminary results are not expected from the electoral commission until Tuesday.

The date of the second and final round has not been announced, but it must happen by October 23 at the latest and may even take place on the same day as legislative polls, October 6. Those polls are supposed to be more significant, as Tunisia is an emerging parliamentary democracy. But several candidates have called for presidential powers to be beefed up, despite years of dictatorship under Ben Ali. —AFP

Underfire PM claims 'huge' Brexit progress

LONDON: Prime Minister Boris Johnson insisted yesterday that "huge" progress was being made in Brexit talks and declared Britain would break out of the European Union just like the comic book hero "The Incredible Hulk". The Conservative leader made the comments ahead of meetings with European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker and EU negotiator Michel Barnier in Luxembourg on Monday.

Johnson told the Mail on Sunday newspaper he was "very confident" of getting a divorce deal at an EU summit on October 17, in time for Brexit on October 31. In an odd analogy, he compared Britain to the Marvel Comics character Hulk—the destructive alter ego of scientist Bruce Banner who turns into the ferocious green giant when enraged or stressed. "The madder Hulk gets, the stronger Hulk gets and he always escaped, no matter how tightly bound in he seemed to be—and that is the case for this country," he said.

But Johnson is facing strong opposition in parliament to his threat to leave the EU without a deal on October 31 if his negotiations fail. Many of the rebels are on his own side and on Saturday night, one of his Conservative MPs defected to the pro-European Liberal Democrats. Former universities minister Sam Gyimah, who briefly ran against Johnson for the party leadership this summer, condemned him for "veering towards populism".



ENGLAND: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson, right, meets members of the public during his visits to Doncaster Market, in Doncaster, northern England. — AFP

The Lib Dems, who now have 18 MPs in the 650-seat House of Commons yesterday voted at their party conference to reverse Brexit if they ever won a majority in parliament. Elsewhere, former prime minister David Cameron, who led the failed campaign to stay in the EU in 2016, accused Johnson in his memoirs of only pursuing Brexit out of political ambition. The turmoil comes ahead of another crucial week, as the Supreme Court considers the legality of Johnson's decision to suspend parliament earlier this month until October 14.

Hulk was a winner

Johnson was a leading "Leave" campaigner in the referendum, and took office in July promising to deliver Brexit no matter what. He

wants to renegotiate the terms struck by his predecessor Theresa May, which MPs have rejected, but EU leaders have so far refused. Johnson repeated that "under no circumstances" would he delay Brexit. However, he may have no choice after MPs last week passed a law to postpone Britain's exit date until January if he does not get a deal by the EU summit.

His comparison with Hulk drew derision from Guy Verhofstadt, Brexit coordinator for the European Parliament. "Even to Trumpian standards the Hulk comparison is infantile. Is the EU supposed to be scared by this? The British public impressed?" he tweeted. However, Brexit Secretary Steve Barclay told Sky News: "The Hulk was a winner and was extremely popular." —AFP

Pak summons Afghan, Indian diplomats

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has summoned diplomats from Afghanistan and India after several shooting incidents along two different borders killed four Pakistani soldiers and a civilian woman. Accusations of firing by both sides across the Afghan-Pakistani border, and by both Indian and Pakistani forces across an old ceasefire line dividing their areas in the Muslim-majority region of Kashmir are common.

The latest incidents come at an especially tense time between Pakistan and India, and as talks between the United States and the Afghan Taliban have broken down. Pakistan's Foreign Office summoned an Afghan diplomat on Saturday to account for what it said was firing into Pakistan by militants in Afghanistan, a spokesman for Pakistan's foreign ministry said in a statement. The militants shot and killed a Pakistani soldier on patrol in one incident late on Friday. In a second incident, Pakistani forces fencing a section of the border were attacked and three were killed, the ministry said on Saturday.

Both incidents occurred in Pakistan's northwestern Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Pakistan underscored in its meeting with the Afghan diplomat that Afghanistan was responsible for securing its side of the border. An Afghan government spokesman could not be immediately reached. Afghan officials have in recent weeks accused the Pakistani military of several incidents of heavy artillery fire into Afghanistan. Both of the uneasy neighbors are battling militant factions along their largely porous border and each accuses the other of harboring their militant enemies.

Pakistan also summoned an Indian diplomat on Saturday after it said firing by Indian forces across the Line of Control (LoC) in the disputed territory of Kashmir killed a 40-year-old woman from the village of Balakot. The nuclear-armed neighbors have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir. The LoC, an old ceasefire line, is the de facto border between the parts of Kashmir that India and Pakistan administer. Tensions between the two countries have flared since Aug 5 when New Delhi flooded Indian Kashmir with troops to quell unrest after it revoked the region's special status. — Reuters