

International

Russian president's party set to retain parliament majority

Elections marred by claims of censorship and rampant ballot stuffing

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin's party was set to retain a majority in parliament as Russia yesterday concluded a three-day election in which most Kremlin critics were barred from running. The vote comes in the wake of an unprecedented crackdown on the opposition this year, with Russian authorities jailing Putin's best-known domestic foe Alexei Navalny and banning his organizations as "extremist".

In the lead-up to this weekend's vote, all of his top allies were arrested or had fled the country, with anyone associated with his groups kept from running in the parliamentary and local polls scheduled to close at 8:00 pm yesterday across 11 time zones. "These essentially aren't elections. People in effect have no choice," 43-year-old businessman Vladimir Zakharov told AFP in Russia's second city Saint Petersburg. The elections were also marred by claims of censorship and rampant ballot stuffing.

As voting kicked off Friday, Apple and Google caused an uproar among Russia's opposition after they removed Navalny's "Smart Voting" app, which showed supporters which candidate they should back to unseat Kremlin-aligned politicians. Sources familiar with Google and Apple's decision told AFP the move was taken under pressure from Russian authorities, including threats to arrest the tech giants' local staff. By late Friday, the popular Telegram messenger had also removed Navalny's "Smart Voting" bot, and yesterday Google Docs and YouTube videos containing the lists of the recommended candidates had also been blocked.

Navalny's team, which promptly made new Google Docs and YouTube videos with the lists, said that Google had complied with demands made by Russia's media regulator Roskomnadzor. In a

final pitch to voters from behind bars yesterday, Navalny wrote on Instagram: "Today is a day when your voice truly matters." Turnout was at 35 percent as of yesterday morning, according to Russia's elections commission.

'Putin celebrating victory'

Russian social media meanwhile was inundated with reports of ballot stuffing and military servicemen patrolling polling stations. Critics also pointed to online voting, new limits on independent election observers and the polls being spread over three days as presenting opportunities for mass voting fraud.



Most Kremlin critics barred from running

In Saint Petersburg, 43-year-old voter Kirill Sergeenko said yesterday he waited to cast his ballot until the final day because "hopefully there will be fewer chances for election rigging". "Even if nothing depends on us, we must do at least something," he said. As of yesterday afternoon, the independent Golos election monitor - which authorities branded a "foreign agent" ahead of the polls - had tracked more than 3,600 reports of voting violations.



MOSCOW: Russian Communist party leader Gennady Zyuganov casts his ballot on the last day of the three-day parliamentary election in Moscow yesterday. — AFP

Elections chief Ella Pamfilova said her commission had received 137 reports of voting "coercion". Going into the lower house State Duma vote, Putin's United Russia party was polling at historic lows. Recent surveys by state-run pollster VTsIOM showed fewer than 30 percent of Russians planning to vote for the party, down at least 10 percentage points in the weeks ahead of the last parliamentary election in 2016. While 68-year-old Putin remains popular, United Russia has seen its support drop as living standards decline

following years of economic stagnation.

But the ruling party is widely expected to retain its two-thirds majority in the lower house, allowing it to push through legislative changes without resistance. In addition to United Russia, 13 more parties are running in the elections. They, however, are widely seen as token opposition doing the Kremlin's bidding. On Saturday, Navalny ally Leonid Volkov said "Putin was celebrating a huge victory" after tech giants "caved in to the Kremlin's blackmail" but still called on supporters to vote. — AFP

Prisoners, newcomers and spoilers: Russia candidates

MOSCOW: Russia's three-day parliamentary and local elections close yesterday, with most Kremlin critics banned from running and the ruling United Russia party expected to retain its majority. From spoiler candidates to TV personalities, here are five types of candidates that Russians will see on their ballots on the last day of voting:

Newcomers

With United Russia facing historically low popularity ratings, the Kremlin sought to revamp its image and introduce fresh faces. Among them is doctor Denis Protsenko, who is in charge of Moscow's main Covid-19 hospital and a symbol of the fight against the coronavirus. He initially refused the nomination, but after a call from President Vladimir Putin, the 46-year-old stepped forward.

Another new name is Maria Butina, who in 2018 was sentenced to 18 months in prison in the United States for illegally acting as a foreign agent for Russia. After her deportation, the 32-year-old gun rights activist became

a frequent guest on state television and now co-hosts a show on RT, a Kremlin-funded TV channel. This year, she took a film crew to the prison of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny - then on hunger strike and demanding medical care - comparing his conditions in jail to a summer camp.

Struggling opposition

Nearly all vocal Kremlin critics were barred. Ahead of the polls, organizations linked to top Putin critic Navalny were labeled "extremist", preventing his allies from balloting. Navalny himself barely survived poisoning by nerve agent last summer and was jailed on old fraud charges in February. Kremlin critic Andrei Pivovarov, who is running for parliament, was hauled off a flight and detained. The 39-year-old campaigned from behind bars in the southern city of Krasnodar, with the help of his lawyer and volunteers.

The former executive director of the now-disbanded group of Putin critics Open Russia, Mikhail



KRASNODAR: Activists run a campaign event for Andrei Pivovarov - former head of the exiled Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky's pro-democracy group Open Russia (that was outlawed in 2017) - who is being held in the city's Detention Centre No 1. — AFP

Khodorkovsky, faces up to six years in prison for his involvement in an "undesirable" organization. Darya Artamonova, 19, an independent candidate running for city council in the Siberian town of Berdsk, said she has received numerous threats, including a funeral wreath sent to her parents.

Spoilers

The use of spoilers - non-winning, often similarly named candidates who run to weaken support for a popular

politician - is a common tactic. In Saint Petersburg, the ploy was taken to the extreme. Opposition politician Boris Vishnevsky, who is running for reelection to the regional parliament in Russia's second city, is competing against two others named "Boris Vishnevsky" and who, like him, are balding and sport a short salt-and-pepper beard. Moscow-based opposition politician Ilya Yashin, who was barred from running, said he too has a rival with the same surname. — AFP

Hong Kong elite selects 'patriots only' committee

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's political elite began selecting a powerful committee yesterday which will choose the city's next leader and nearly half the legislature under a new "patriots only" system imposed by Beijing. The financial hub has never been a democracy - the source of years of protests - but a small and vocal opposition was tolerated after the city's 1997 handover to authoritarian China.

Huge and often violent democracy rallies exploded two years ago and Beijing responded with a crackdown and a new political system where only those deemed loyal are allowed to stand for office. The first poll under that new system - carrying the slogan "Patriots rule Hong Kong" - took place yesterday as members of the city's ruling classes cast votes for a 1,500-seat

Election Committee.

In December, that committee will appoint 40 of the city's 90 legislators - 30 others will be chosen by special interest groups and just 20 will be directly elected. The following year, it will pick Hong Kong's next Beijing-approved leader. Beijing insists the new political system is more representative and will ensure "anti-China" elements are not allowed into office. Critics say it leaves no room for the pro-democracy opposition, turning Hong Kong into a mirror of the authoritarian Communist Party-ruled mainland.

"Hong Kongers are completely cut off from electoral operations," Nathan Law, a prominent democracy leader who fled to Britain last year said. "All election runners will become puppet showmen under Beijing's entire control... with no meaningful competition." Ted Hui, a former lawmaker who moved to Australia, said Hong Kong's political system was now "a rubber-stamp game completely controlled by Beijing". "It's more than a managed democracy. It's an autocracy trying to pretend to be civilized," Hui said.



HONG KONG: A protester stands behind a mock jail with photos of the 47 pro-democracy figures already in prison as Hong Kong's political elite began selecting a powerful committee which will choose the city's next leader. — AFP

4,800 voters, 6,000 police

Back in 2016, some 233,000 Hong Kongers were allowed to select the Election Committee. That figure has now been trimmed to around 4,800 - 0.06 percent of Hong Kong's 7.5 million population. Police said 6,000 officers were on standby to ensure there were no protests or disruptions. When polls closed yesterday evening,

authorities said turnout among the select group of electors was 86 percent. "This is an important election although the number of people eligible to join is not large," Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam told reporters, adding the new system would ensure "anti-China troublemakers" would no longer be able to "obstruct" the government. — AFP

Under-fire Australian minister resigns over anonymous donation

SYDNEY: An under-fire Australian minister who accepted an anonymous donation to sue public broadcaster ABC after it published rape allegations against him has resigned, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced yesterday. The accusation that an unnamed senior government minister raped a 16-year-old girl in 1988 helped to spark nationwide women's rights protests in March. Then-attorney general Christian Porter went public to deny the allegations soon after they emerged and was later

demoted to a lesser portfolio but remained a key member of the conservative government.

His political future was thrown into doubt last week after he revealed he had accepted funds from a blind trust to pay some of his legal fees in the ABC case, throwing up the possibility of an ethics violation. Morrison, who had sought advice on whether that was a breach of ministerial standards, said yesterday Porter had resigned to avoid any real or perceived conflict of interest over the unknown donor. "That is the appropriate decision in these circumstances (and) that reinforces our government's commitment to those standards," Morrison said.

Porter was expected to remain as a member of parliament but will sit on the backbench, the prime minister added. In a statement to ABC, Porter insisted his disclosure was within the rules, but said the issue had become an "unhelpful distraction for the govern-

ment". While he did not receive any damages from the broadcaster after dropping the defamation suit, an editor's note was added to the original article stating the broadcaster had not intended to suggest he committed the criminal offences.

The woman at the centre of the story died in June 2020, reportedly by suicide. The accusations emerged just weeks after a young government staffer separately alleged she was raped by a colleague in parliament in 2019 and failed by her bosses when she reported the incident. The cases spurred tens of thousands of women to take to the streets, calling for gender equality and an end to sexual violence in Australia. As part of its response, the government has introduced a new parliamentary code of conduct and recently held an online "women's safety summit" that was panned by some advocates as ineffectual. — AFP

News in brief

Convoy hit by roadside bomb

YANGON: Myanmar anti-junta dissidents have carried out a bomb attack on security forces near Yangon, with several killed in an ensuing firefight, the military and media said. The Southeast Asian nation has been in turmoil since the military toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government in February, sparking mass pro-democracy protests and a bloody crackdown by the military. Various townships across Myanmar have formed so-called "people defense forces" to fight back against the junta, although the majority of clashes have been reported in rural areas. Security forces were travelling through Khayan, a suburb of Myanmar's commercial hub Yangon on Friday when they were attacked with a homemade bomb, the junta said in a statement on Saturday. "Both groups fired back and forth - a member of the security forces was injured," the statement said, adding that firearms and ammunition were confiscated after the clash. — AFP

Johannesburg mayor killed

JOHANNESBURG: The mayor of Johannesburg was killed in a car accident as he returned from campaigning with South Africa's president on Saturday, just over a month after being elected, his office said in a statement. Jolidee Matongo, 46, was returning from a voter registration drive in Soweto township ahead of local elections when the accident happened. "It is hard to comprehend this tragedy, given the vitality and passion with which Mayor Matongo interacted with me and residents of Soweto so shortly before his death," President Cyril Ramaphosa said in a tweet. "Nothing could prepare any of us for this sudden loss, which has deprived our nation's economic centre of its second Executive Mayor in two months." Matongo's predecessor died from Covid-19 complications in July, and Matongo was elected on August 10. Gauteng province premier David Makhura, who was also at the Soweto voter registration drive, said the news had left him "shocked and shattered". — AFP

IS claims Syria attack

BEIRUT: The Islamic State group on Saturday claimed an attack on a major natural gas pipeline southeast of the Syrian capital that led to power outages in the city and surrounding areas. IS fighters "were able to plant and detonate explosives on the gas pipeline feeding the Tishreen and Deir Ali plants," the group said in a statement. The Deir Ali station southeast of Damascus generates half of Syria's power needs, Electricity Minister Ghassan Al-Zamel said Saturday in comments carried by the official SANA news agency. He said an attack on the gas pipeline on Friday evening with explosive devices caused the station to go out of service temporarily. The outage affected several other stations, causing blackouts in Damascus, its outskirts and other areas, Zamel said, before power was restored some thirty minutes later. — AFP