

CROWDED FIELD COMPETES FOR COMOROS PRESIDENT

MORONI, Comoros: Voters in the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Comoros voted for a new president Sunday from a crowded field of 25 candidates, with a struggling economy and poor infrastructure high on the agenda. Polling in the country of less than one million people went off without any major incidents after voting opened 7:00 am (0400 GMT), although some were delayed by the late arrival of voting materials. Voting in areas affected by delays continued after the official closing time at 6:00 pm.

A total of 159,000 voters on Grand Comore island were eligible to vote in the first round of the election, in accordance with electoral rules that stipulate the president is chosen on a rotating basis from one of the archipelago's three main islands. Among those running for president are a former coup leader and the vice president. After the first round, the three top candidates will go into a nationwide run-off on April 10 that will decide the successor to President Ikililou Dhoinine.

Dhoinine comes from Moheli, the smallest of the three main islands. The other island in

the trio is Anjouan. The system of rotating candidates among islands was established in 2001 in a bid to usher in stability after more than 20 coups or attempted coups, in the years following independence from France in 1975. Among the candidates leading the field are vice president Mohamed Ali Soilih, Grande Comore governor Mouigni Baraka and Azali Assoumani, a former coup leader and two-time former president.

Athoumani Toioussi, an unemployed mother who was voting in the capital Moroni, on Grande Comore, said she would vote for Assoumani, despite his coup history. "Yes, he came to power through a coup but it helped get the country out of chaos," Toioussi told AFP. Another voter, Houmadi Ahmedi, favoured Baraka saying "he gave learning materials to elementary school." Moineaeha Youssouf Djalali, a businesswoman, is the only female candidate in a country where the majority are Sunni Muslims.

Avoiding 'Double Voting'

Dhoinine's successful completion of his five-year term has been seen as a sign of

growing stability in Comoros, though many candidates had expressed fears of electoral fraud. "Real efforts are being made by the election commission and international actors to ease any political or social tensions," European Union representative Eduardo Campos Martins said. The electoral commission on Saturday agreed to a request from 20 candidates to ban proxy voting, seen as a possible source of fraud, "to preserve the peace". Voters were also set to be forbidden from leaving Moroni or moving between villages unless they had an official pass "to avoid double voting", the interior ministry said.

The election is being monitored by dozens of African and international observers as well as a 425-person monitoring platform established by local civil society groups. The campaign of all 25 candidates had been centred on similar promises of free health care, education and infrastructure improvement, in a country where the roads are riddled with potholes and women and children queue for water. Voters were also choosing governors for the three islands. — AFP



MORONI: Voters queue on the Grande Comore island to cast their ballots for the presidential election yesterday. — AFP

SAUDI PRINCE: TROOP OFFER REFLECTS UNEASE ON SYRIA

'MUSLIM NATIONS MUST LEAD IN COUNTERTERRORISM'

ABU DHABI: A prominent Saudi prince said yesterday that the kingdom's offer to send troops to Syria to fight extremist groups reflects growing unease over the ability of US-led airstrikes alone to defeat the Islamic State group and end the Syrian civil war. Prince Turki Al-Faisal, speaking at a luncheon in Abu Dhabi attended by a handful of journalists, said the kingdom does not expect the US-led coalition battling the IS group, of which Saudi Arabia is a member, will succeed unless there is a ground intervention.

Saudi Arabia has made clear that its willingness to send special forces to Syria is contingent on the US leading the ground effort. "The world community has the capability, economic, political, military and otherwise, to put a stop to the killing," he said. "I think it is high time that people said enough is enough, but simply saying it is not going to do it. There has to be concrete action on the ground to put a stop to the killing."

He added that he has not seen any indication from Saudi leaders that if Saudi troops were deployed to Syria, they would also fight Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's forces. Riyadh is one of the main supporters of Syrian rebels battling to overthrow Assad. Its regional rival Iran is one of Assad's main backers. The prince, who does not hold an official seat in government, is an influential and outspoken member of the Saudi royal family. He headed Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Directorate for more than two decades until Sept 1, 2001, and held ambassador posts to the US, the UK and Ireland.

Fighting Terror

Speaking earlier at a press conference, he said Muslim countries need to take the lead in fighting terrorism. The kingdom is currently hosting an 18-day military exercise with 20 members of a recently announced Islamic counterterrorism alliance, which includes Pakistan, Sudan, Jordan and neighboring Gulf states. Defense ministers from the coalition of Muslim-majority countries are scheduled to hold their first meeting in Saudi Arabia sometime in March, and the Saudi leadership is working on mak-



ABU DHABI: Former director of the Saudi Arabia General Intelligence Directorate Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, and a member of the board of the Beirut Institute, talks during a press conference yesterday. — AP

ing its capital a logistical hub for the 34-nation alliance.

The prince said that because the majority of victims of terrorist acts are Muslims, "it is our responsibility as Muslim countries to play the primary role in fighting this disease that has impacted us all." Notably absent from the coalition are Iran, Syria and Iraq, all of which are battling the Islamic State group. Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shiite-majority Iran are fiercely divided on a host of issues and support opposite sides in the wars in Yemen and Syria.

Relations worsened after the execution of a popular Shiite cleric in Saudi Arabia last month, which trig-

gered protests in Iran and the ransacking of the Saudi Embassy and another diplomatic mission there. The two countries then severed diplomatic and trade ties. As Iran readies for parliamentary elections on Feb 26, the prince said he has little hope that those elected will help bridge the political divide.

He said the vote is likely to make the relationship "even worse" because some liberal and reformist candidates were barred from running by the country's Guardian Council, which vets candidates. "You are going to get a very conservative (parliament) as is the present one, and so we're going to have more of the same," he said. — AP

EGYPTIAN COLUMNIST DEALS STINGING BLOW

CAIRO: A prominent columnist yesterday delivered the harshest attack to date against Egypt's president in the local media, saying that Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi presided over a "theocracy" that is no different from the Islamist-led government he overthrew in 2013. In a front-page column in the Al-Maqal daily, Ibrahim Eissa expressed outrage over a two-year prison sentence issued Saturday against author Ahmed Naji for publishing a sexually explicit excerpt of his novel that prosecutors said violated "public modesty."

The sentence has angered Egyptian authors and artists, who say it's a blatant encroachment on the freedom of expression and artistic creativity enshrined in Egypt's new constitution. A statement signed by 13 rights groups and published Sunday called for Naji's immediate release. Sisi maintains that Egypt's judiciary is independent, an assertion disputed by rights activists, who say it is beholden to the executive branch.

As military chief, Sisi led the 2013 overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi, an Islamist who was Egypt's first freely elected president but proved deeply divisive. Sisi was elected the following year, and has enjoyed fawning coverage by state and private media, most of which is owned by influential businessmen. But the unusually strong criticism by Eissa, a dean of the Egyptian media who supported the 2013 overthrow and has personally interviewed Sisi, indicates growing discontent.

"Say what you will, Mr President, and speak at your conferences ... as you wish, but the reality of your state is different," he wrote. "Your state violates the constitution, harasses thinkers and cre-

ators and jails writers and authors. "Your state is a theocracy, Mr. President, while you are talking all the time of a modern, civilian state," he wrote. "Your state and its agencies, just like those of your predecessor, hate intellectuals, thought and creativity and only like hypocrites, flatterers and composers of poems of support and flattery."

Criticism

The growing criticism comes as the Egyptian government has struggled to deliver on promises to stabilize the economy after the years of unrest that followed the 2011 uprising, which ended President Hosni Mubarak's nearly three-decade reign. The bombing of a Russian passenger jet last year dealt a major blow to the already suffering tourism industry, the local currency is weakening and foreign reserves are drying up.

An Islamist insurgency based in the Sinai Peninsula, which grew increasingly assertive after Morsi's ouster, has been able to carry out attacks across the country, adding to the sense of crisis. Sisi has meanwhile overseen the harshest crackdown in decades, jailing thousands of Islamists and hundreds of secular activists. All unauthorized protests have been banned, and activists say the police have reverted to the brutality of the Mubarak years. Sisi has said his ouster of Morsi saved Egypt from a theocracy and restored civilian, democratic rule. But Eissa called that claim into question. "Where is this civilian state? Where do you see it?" he wrote, addressing Sisi. "This is a state that witnesses more legal prosecution of writers than what we have seen during the Brotherhood's one-year rule." — AP



KABATIYA: Palestinian mourners carry the body of Qusay Abo Al-Rub, who was shot and killed by Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint, during his funeral in this West Bank village near Jenin yesterday. — AP

BIBI DEFENDS TOP GENERAL IN EXCESSIVE FORCE DEBATE

JERUSALEM: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu defended Israel's military chief yesterday after the general was criticized for saying he would not want soldiers confronting a wave of Palestinian stabbings to "empty a magazine" into a girl wielding scissors. One member of Netanyahu's rightwing cabinet said Lieutenant-General Gadi Eisenkot's remarks last week could be misinterpreted by Israel's international critics as confirming allegations, which it denies, that disproportionate force has been used against assailants, many of them youths.

Another cabinet minister, posting on Facebook, said soldiers might now hesitate to shoot attackers, putting themselves and others at risk. Netanyahu called the internal political debate "hollow" and said Israel's top general was merely "stating the obvious" about rules of military engagement, under which soldiers can open fire only when lives are in danger. "Everything said after (Eisenkot's statement) stems from ignorance or an attempt at political bashing," Netanyahu told his cabinet in public remarks. Video of alleged attackers being hit by multiple gunshots, sometimes after falling to the ground, has stirred controversy. Israel says such force is sometimes necessary in fluid situations where soldiers' and civilians' lives are in danger. In the latest example on Friday, Al Jazeera television aired footage showing two or

three Israeli paramilitary police repeatedly shooting a Palestinian lying on the ground after, according to Israeli authorities, he stabbed two officers outside the walls of Jerusalem's Old City.

"It's impossible to judge the situation the combatants are in," Israeli Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan told Channel 10 television on Saturday. "There have been incidents in which (security forces) opened fire, the terrorist was not killed, and he managed to stab again."

Rules of Engagement

Addressing high school students on Wednesday, Eisenkot got into political hot water when he spoke of the rules of engagement. "There were places where a 13-year-old girl was holding scissors or a knife and there was an obstacle between her and the soldiers," he said. "I wouldn't want a soldier to open fire and empty a magazine into a girl like that, even if she is doing something very serious, but I would want him to use the necessary force to carry out the mission." Last November in Jerusalem, two Palestinian girls stabbed an elderly man with scissors before a policeman shot and killed one of them and wounded the other. Closed circuit video showed the officer firing several times at one of the girls as she was lying motionless on the ground. — Reuters

IRAN MODERATES COULD INFLUENCE NEXT LEADER

BEIRUT: Iran's Assembly of Experts, made up mostly of elderly clerics, has not mattered much for years. The body's main task is choosing Iran's supreme leader, but that job has not come vacant since 1989. This time it's different. Given the ailing health of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 76, the Assembly to be elected on Feb 26 for an eight-year term is likely to pick his successor, charting the course of the country for many years to come.

The Supreme Leader is the highest military and judicial authority in the country and has broad powers overseeing other branches of government. Even the president, who is directly elected, has less authority. Khamenei, hardline successor to the Islamic Republic's founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, has ensured for decades that Tehran remains hostile to the United States abroad, and slow to embrace cultural reforms at home.

Elections for parliament are scheduled for the same day, but it is the outcome of the Assembly election that is likely to have a much greater long-term impact. In terms of numbers, hardliners are almost certain to have the upper hand. The Guardian Council, a hardliner-dominated government body which reviews the eligibility of candidates, has already disqualified 475 candidates, many thought to be moderates, leaving just 161 people vying for 88 places.

Among those disqualified was Khomeini's grandson Hassan Khomeini, a charismatic reformer blessed with his grandfather's potent name. The Council questioned his religious qualifications. But the list of those permitted to stand includes other prominent moderates, first and foremost President Hassan Rouhani himself, who is riding a wave of domestic popularity after helping seal a nuclear deal with world powers last year.

He is joined by one of his most influential predecessors, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who already holds an Assembly seat and will be campaigning to keep it. Earlier this week, Rouhani released the names of 16 candidates, including Rafsanjani, in a bloc calling themselves the "Friends of Moderation." Their campaign slogan: "Moderation is Islam."

Within the assembly, a conservative majority bloc is likely to be led by hardline clerics like Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi, Ahmad Jannati and Mohammad Yazdi. Nevertheless, the moderate minority could still

play an important role in choosing the next Supreme Leader. When Khamenei was chosen in 1989 after Khomeini's death, the decision was taken only after elaborate backroom dealing that went far beyond a simple tally of votes in the Assembly.

There was discussion of putting together a leadership council, before a handful of top clerics in the Assembly, including Rafsanjani, pushed for the nomination of Khamenei. Khamenei did not have the appropriate religious rank to hold the position at the time, so the constitution was amended to allow him to take his post. Similar dealing may take place in order to choose Khamenei's successor. "Shiite clerics are really masters of the art of the deal," said Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, a US-based organization which has criticized the widespread disqualification of candidates.

"So while it is important how big your faction is in the Assembly of Experts it does depend on who the charismatic dealmaker is at that time." In December, Rafsanjani broke a taboo by noting that a group had been formed within the Assembly to review possible candidates who could replace Khamenei.

Complaints over Disqualifications

Moderate politicians and others have complained about the disqualifications by the Guardian Council, arguing that they skew the electoral field in favour of hardliners. Rafsanjani publicly criticized the disqualification of Hassan Khomeini. And 296 university professors from around the country signed a letter of protest to Rouhani over widespread disqualifications for both the parliament and Assembly election. Hardliners say the complaints are unfounded and stem from a realization among moderates that they will not win a majority of seats in the Assembly. "The reformists are more focused on eliminating Mesbah-Yazdi, Jannati and Yazdi from the election than gaining a majority," Amir Mohebian, a conservative Tehran-based political strategist and analyst who has advised top Iranian politicians, wrote in an e-mail, referring to the top conservative candidates. Still, there is an acknowledgement of the high stakes. "The hardliners are very anxious about succession and the future direction of the country," said Sanam Vakil, an associate fellow at Chatham House who focuses on Iranian affairs. "The hardline objective is to prevent any social or political liberalisation within the state." — Reuters



TEHRAN: An Iranian woman applauds during a reformists' campaign meeting for the upcoming parliamentary elections at Hejab hall in downtown Tehran on Saturday. — AFP