

PAKISTAN CLERICS AFFIRM TRANSGENDER MARRIAGES LEGAL UNDER ISLAMIC LAW

LAHORE: A group of clerics in Pakistan has declared marriage between transgender individuals permissible in Islam, saying they have a right to be buried in Muslim ceremonies, according to a copy of a religious edict Reuters obtained yesterday. Transgender people also have full rights under Islamic inheritance law, the Tanzeem Ittehad-i-Ummat Pakistan, a little-known clerical body in the eastern city of Lahore, said in its fatwa.

"It is permissible for a transgender person with male indications on his body

to marry a transgender person with female indications on her body," said the document, signed by 50 clerics and issued on Sunday. "Also, normal men and women can also marry such transgender people as have clear indications on their body." But it did say what these indications were.

In 2012, Pakistan's Supreme Court declared equal rights for transgender citizens, including the right to inherit property and assets, preceded a year earlier by the right to vote. Pakistani

marriage law remains murkier, however. It denies homosexual couples permission to marry, with male homosexuals having been charged under anti-sodomy laws in the past.

Sunday's fatwa declared marriage with any individual possessing both male and female "indications" to be against Islamic principles. Shunned by mainstream society, transgender individuals in the country of 190 million are often forced into begging, prostitution or dancing to earn a living. Late last

month, Alisha, a 23-year-old transgender woman, died after being shot and then refused treatment at the largest public sector hospital in Peshawar, in northwest Pakistan.

Her death sparked debate over the rights of transgender people, with an inquiry concluding that senior doctors at the hospital were responsible for "criminal negligence", and recommending that criminal charges be filed. Transgender people are, however, also sometimes venerated in the South Asian tradition of

according spiritual powers to eunuchs and others who fall outside traditional gender divisions.

Although the Lahore clerics' fatwa is not legally binding, it also recommended that people consider harassment of transgender people a crime under Islam. "Making noises at transgender people, making fun of them, teasing them, or thinking of them as inferior is against sharia law, because such an act amounts to objecting to one of Allah's creations, which is not correct," it added. —Reuters



SYDNEY: People hand out how-to-vote pamphlets outside a polling station in Sydney's central business district yesterday, which was open to voters who will be absent on election day. —AFP

AUSTRALIAN CONSERVATIVES GAIN MINOR EDGE IN BREXIT SHADOW

SYDNEY: Australia's ruling party yesterday used the Brexit vote to warn against voting for Labor in upcoming elections as a poll showed the Liberals ahead for the first time in a drawn-out campaign. The country goes to the polls on Saturday with economic management assuming added significance in the wake of Britain's decision to leave the European Union, sparking global instability.

"There will be considerable uncertainty for some time. You're seeing that every night on television at the moment," Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said in Adelaide, reinforcing his message in the wake of the referendum. "It is critical that we maintain strong, stable leadership."

The Brexit-related pitch was a theme driven home by Turnbull ministers with Treasurer Scott Morrison saying: "It's so important to have stability at the moment, more than any other time." Turnbull called an election seven weeks ago, setting off a grueling campaign that has focused around economic management, with issues such as immigration and climate change taking a back seat.

His government argues it has the fiscal know-how to ensure the country transitions from an unprecedented mining investment boom to an economy which is

more diverse and creates new jobs. Labor has driven home its traditional values of improving health and education and until now the two parties have been neck and neck in opinion polls. But for the first time since the campaign started, the conservative coalition has inched ahead with a Newspoll in The Australian giving it a 51-49 percent lead on a two-party basis.

The poll of 1,713 people, taken from Thursday night until Sunday, is the first to gauge the effect on the election of Friday's shock Brexit decision. The newspaper said Britain's withdrawal from the EU appeared to have caused some voters to switch from minor parties to the Liberals. Turnbull continues to be seen as the better prime minister ahead of Labor rival Bill Shorten and strategists from both parties told the Sydney Morning Herald they expected him to be returned but with a reduced majority.

The concern is that even if Turnbull retains power, a host of independents or minor parties may win seats in the upper house Senate, which would allow them to block legislation if they align with Labor. Australia's politics have been turbulent in recent years, with a "revolving door" of those in charge. Four different leaders have served since 2013 as parties removed sitting prime ministers. —AFP

TWO KILLED, 80 WOUNDED IN MADAGASCAR 'TERROR BLAST'

ANTANANARIVO: Two people were killed and more than 80 wounded in a grenade attack in Madagascar's capital Sunday during the country's national day celebrations, in what the president called "an act of terrorism". The blast struck the Mahamasina municipal stadium in Antananarivo at around 1600 GMT, just as a free concert was taking place to mark the nation's 56th anniversary of independence from France.

President Hery Rajaonarimampianina, who visited the injured victims in hospital, blamed the attack on tensions with political opponents in the Indian Ocean island nation. "There may be differences of opinion between us, but these acts of destabilization are unacceptable," he said in a statement broadcast on national television, describing the attack as "not just a destabilizing act but an act of terrorism". Pleading for calm, he added: "We will not respond to violence with violence."

According to the gendarmerie, the attack killed two teenagers aged 16 and 18, while 84 people were injured. A military parade was held at the stadium earlier in the day. "The explosion was caused by a

grenade," general Anthony Rakotoarison, head of security and intelligence with the national gendarmerie, told AFP by phone. "We consider this a terrorist act," he added.

The last attack to hit Madagascar was in January 2014 when a grenade blast killed a toddler and injured several other people outside the same stadium targeted on Sunday. No arrests were ever made in connection with that attack and there was no claim of responsibility. Madagascar, one of the world's poorest countries, is slowly getting back on its feet after a lengthy period of political instability triggered by the 2009 ouster of President Marc Ravalomanana by Antananarivo's then-mayor Andry Rajoelina.

Rajoelina led a transitional government until late 2013, when a new election that was designed to resolve complex struggles brought Rajaonarimampianina to power. International donors, on which the country relies heavily, only recently returned to Madagascar after withdrawing over the 2009 turmoil, and the economy is starting to show the first signs of recovery. —AFP

SPAIN CONSERVATIVES PUSH FOR GOVT AFTER UNCERTAIN VOTE

HOPING TO UNBLOCK MONTHS OF POLITICAL PARALYSIS

MADRID: Spain's ruling conservatives made a fresh push yesterday to form a government to unblock months of political paralysis after emerging stronger from another inconclusive general election. The Popular Party (PP) was the big winner of Sunday's elections, the second in six months, which played out against a background of turbulence from Britain's shock vote to leave the European Union that analysts said may have influenced the polls.

The fractured results were much the same as after uncertain December polls, with the PP coming first, followed by the Socialists, a far-left coalition led by Podemos and market-friendly upstart Ciudadanos. But unlike the other three parties which lost seats, votes or both, the PP came out strengthened from the election, beating expectations and its December score with 137 seats in the 350-strong lower house of parliament.

However, the PP, led by incumbent prime minister Mariano Rajoy, is still far from an absolute majority and needs support from other parties to form a government—no easy task. But the extra seats give Rajoy more clout in coalition negotiations, coupled with the fact that parties are under pressure to reach a deal to avoid a third round of elections. An emboldened Rajoy held his hand out to parties yesterday and particularly the Socialists, telling Spanish radio he would speak to the PSOE first, "which remains our country's second political force."

Rajoy or no Rajoy?

Looking ahead, the PP could team up with market friendly Ciudadanos, but their combined total number of seats would still not be enough to form a majority centre-right government and win the necessary vote of confidence. So they will need to court smaller regional parties and the

Socialists (PSOE), which came second in Sunday's elections with 85 seats, its worst score in modern history.

The PSOE could decide to abstain in the parliamentary vote to let a government through and avoid taking the country to a third round of elec-

would discuss when the time came. "But the PSOE wants to replace Rajoy," he said. In its pre-election campaign, Ciudadanos had also called for Rajoy to step down. Now though, the PP's better-than-expected results make this more difficult. "Rajoy has come out strengthened internal-

against the Unidos Podemos coalition, emphasizing the need for stability in the face of "radicalism" and "populism."

Britain's shock exit from the European Union last week only contributed to voters' desire for stability, they added. Spain's stock market briefly celebrated



MADRID: Center-right party Ciudadanos leader, Albert Rivera (C) flanked by Secretary General of Ciudadanos, Matias Alonso (CL), leader of Ciudadanos (Citizens) in Catalonia, Ines Arrimadas (CR) and other members gives a press conference after the national executive meeting held one day after the Spanish general elections. —AFP

But angry over a string of corruption scandals that have hit the PP and severe austerity measures under Rajoy's watch, it may not want to back a government with him at the helm. In fact, rival parties before the election had insisted on the fact that they wanted Rajoy to go, whatever the outcome.

"We won't support Rajoy," said Cesar Luena, number-two of the Socialist party, setting the scene for what could be tough coalition negotiations. Asked whether the Socialists would consider abstaining, Luena said this would be an issue they

ly in his party and no one will now be able to tell him that he will block the formation of a government," said Jose Pablo Ferrandiz of polling firm Metroscopia.

Brexit influence

The big loser in Sunday's elections was the far-left coalition composed of Podemos and green-communists Izquierda Unida, which opinion polls had suggested would come second and overtake the Socialists as the country's main left-wing force. Analysts said the PP had conducted a successful campaign

the conservative election win yesterday morning, with shares in its main Ibex 35 index shooting up more than three percent before going back down in line with other markets weighed down by Brexit.

"Many voters opted for the old parties, the parties that are more anchored to the idea of Europe," said Anton Losada, a political scientist at the University of Santiago de Compostela. "There is a sensation of entering territory where we don't really know what is going to happen (with Brexit), and in this territory, best to bet on what we know works." —AFP

INDIA JOINS ELITE MISSILE TECH GROUP CONTROLLING GLOBAL SALE

NEW DELHI: India yesterday joined an exclusive club of countries controlling exports in missile technology, just a day after bemoaning its exclusion from another elite group that governs international nuclear fuel and technology. Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar signed onto the Missile Technology Control Regime aimed at preventing the unchecked proliferation of missiles and their delivery systems.

The foreign ministry, in a statement issued soon after signing the accession document in the presence of the ambassadors of France, the Netherlands and Luxembourg,

thanked the other 34 members of the MTCR group for supporting its inclusion. "India's entry into the regime as its thirty-fifth member would be mutually beneficial in the furtherance of international non-proliferation objectives," the statement said.

Next step

Admission in the MTCR was seen as the next step for India in legitimizing its nuclear energy and missile programs after it conducted atomic tests in 1998 that alarmed the international community. The MTCR restricts the proliferation of missiles, rocket systems,

unmanned air vehicles, or drones, and the technology for systems capable of carrying a payload of 500 kilograms for at least 300 kilometers, as well as systems intended for the delivery of weapons of mass destruction.

In 2008, India signed a landmark civil nuclear deal with the United States giving it some access to nuclear materials and technologies. Since then, India has been pushing for its inclusion in the various elite groups that control the export of nuclear materials and regulate technologies relating to conventional, nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. India still hopes to secure support for joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group, despite strong objections from China.

Last week, at a plenary meeting of the nuclear group in Seoul, India's membership to the 48-nation group that controls access to sensitive nuclear technology was shot down after China raised procedural hurdles. India, still smarting over being denied entry, on Sunday hit out at Beijing, saying that the issue of its membership of the nuclear group was not going to go away. External Affairs ministry spokesman Vikas Swarup said New Delhi had taken up the issue with Beijing at multiple levels.

"We are going to continue discussing this with China. This is going to be an important element of our discussion with China. We will continue to impress upon them that relationships move forward on the basis of mutual accommodation of each other's interests, concerns and priorities," Swarup told reporters in New Delhi. China is not a member of the MTCR, however. Beijing's application to join the MTCR is pending, leading to some analysts in New Delhi to say India could use it as a bargaining chip to leverage its entry into the nuclear group. —AP



NEW DELHI: Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar, left, receives membership papers for the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) from French Ambassador Alexandre Ziegler, second left, Netherlands' Ambassador, Alphonsus Stoeltinga, third left, and Luxembourg's Charge d'Affaires, Laure Huberty. —AP

AFGHAN WARLORD STALLS PEACE DEAL WITH CAPITAL

ISLAMABAD: A former Afghan warlord announced yesterday that a much-touted peace deal between his militant group and the Kabul government was effectively "dead." The comments by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar came after the armed wing of his Hezb-i-Islami party effectively scuttled the deal, drafted weeks ago, with new demands that included the dissolution of the Afghan Unity Government, calling it a US concoction.

In his lengthy diatribe against the Kabul government in the Daily Shahdat magazine belonging to his group, Hekmatyar said the Afghan administration negotiated in bad faith and made demands it could not meet. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government had hoped an agreement with Hekmatyar would be an incentive for other insurgent groups to come to the negotiating table. But in recent weeks, Hezb-i-Islami made additional, impossible-to-meet conditions, including the dissolution of the government, the scrapping of Kabul's current security pact with the United States and a

public timetable for the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan.

Hekmatyar, writing under his pen name Haqqal, said Afghan government negotiators called the security pact with the United States "a red line that we cannot cross." Hekmatyar said only a handful of his group's demands were met in the draft agreement, yet last month when his representatives left Kabul they said they had a final deal that needed only Hekmatyar's signature. Instead Hekmatyar returned the agreement with the additional demands.

He sent the revised deal in a letter his son was to deliver to Ghani. In that letter, Hekmatyar made his demands and said further negotiations should be restricted to the two leaders. His proposals were rejected. Hekmatyar's military strength pales in comparison to the Taliban and is largely limited to the east and northeast of the country. Hekmatyar also has differences with the Taliban and his fighters have clashed with them on several occasions in eastern Afghanistan. —AP