

## A TALE OF TWO 'INDIGNANTS' CITIES IN SPAIN

**MADRID:** Swept to power in 2015 by Spain's "Indignants" anti-austerity movement, two political novices lead Madrid and Barcelona with the tough task of increasing social spending without generating more debt. Now at the halfway point in their terms as mayor, the reviews are mixed for Madrid's Manuela Carmena, a former judge and Barcelona's Ada Colau, an ex-housing activist.

They've been accused of missteps, but the disaster some had predicted for the two political neophytes bent on reducing inequalities and austerity has not come to pass. "Both cities maintain a positive dynamic, they are functioning normally, I don't see any symptom of a 'red' revolution or blunders," says Jordi Alberich, director of the Economy Circle, an influential, non-partisan organisation that scrutinises economic policies and social progress.

### End of VIP loges

Barcelona says it has raised social spending by 50 percent since June 2015 while Madrid increased it by 22 percent last year. "We have eliminated all sorts of sumptuous spending and privileges," Carmena, 73, told AFP. "This has allowed



**BARCELONA:** Mayor of Madrid Manuela Carmena (left) and Mayor of Barcelona Ada Colau attend the "Fearless Cities" international meeting of municipalities, organized by leftwing party "Barcelona en Comu" on June 9, 2017. — AFP

us to increase social spending a lot while reimbursing our debt," she said. So for example, the city stopped renting out expensive private property for its municipal services, or paying for VIP spaces at

events such as the Madrid Open tennis tournament.

City hall spokeswoman Rita Maestre added as an example that they had also raised taxes on supermarket properties.

According to city hall, Madrid's debt has been reduced by more than €1.7 billion (\$1.9 billion) in less than two years. It nevertheless still stood at €3.8 billion at the end of 2016. Carmena said Madrid had also implemented social measures such as "drastically reducing the price of pre-schools."

But the opposition says the newcomers' inexperience was palpable, pointing to the "disorganization" of the city hall in many areas. "They have decided to give priority to early debt repayment before building a single school or library," Begona Villacis, a Madrid councillor for the center-right Ciudadanos party, told the Huffington Post in January. "They're reducing debt at a cost of doing absolutely nothing because they're incapable of management."

### Housing crisis

Both cities have made the right to appropriate housing a focus. For its part, Barcelona has adopted a series of measures such as building 1,900 units of social housing and aiming for a total of 4,100, or stopping 2,000 planned expulsions of people from homes they cannot afford. But Gerardo Pisarello, Barcelona's

interim mayor while 43-year-old Colau is on maternity leave, says "it's not enough".

Rental prices rose 10 percent last year, and even more in areas popular with the millions of tourists who visit Barcelona every year. In an attempt to regulate mass tourism so that it doesn't become unbearable for locals, Barcelona has increased its control of unlicensed tourist housing. It has also slapped Airbnb with a 600,000-euro fine for promoting them, and banned new hotels from opening in saturated areas.

But Joaquim Forn, spokesman for the conservative PD.Cat party, counters that by suspending the opening of two luxury hotels, Barcelona has lost a thousand jobs. "Their priority is redistribution but not creating wealth, which doesn't make sense," he says.

Both cities also want to be greener. Madrid, for instance, ordered half of private cars off the roads - with some exceptions - in December to fight a particularly bad bout of pollution, a first in Spain. But this too was met with resistance. Miguel Angel Belloso, a columnist in the Expansion daily, slammed Carmena's "totalitarian project" and accused her of "persecuting the car". — AFP

## 'HARD' OR 'SOFT' BREXIT? UK ELECTION CHAOS FIRES DEBATE

### MAY IN WEAKENED POSITION AFTER LOSING MAJORITY

**LONDON:** Supporters of "hard" and "soft" Brexit tried to take advantage of the political chaos in Britain on Monday to promote their visions amid fears that their rivalry could revive old divisions in the Conservative party. Prime Minister Theresa May is in a weakened position after losing her parliamentary majority in last week's snap elec-

tion, leaving her vulnerable to both hardliners and moderates in her party. "May has lost all authority on Brexit and everything else. All options are back on the table," Stephen Barber, associate professor of public policy at London South Bank University, told AFP.

Under the "hard Brexit" scenario, which has prevailed so far, Britain would leave the European single market and the customs union and curb EU immigration. It would also leave open the option of walking away from the negotiations with no deal in place - a decision that

many businesses warn could be disastrous. Advocates of a "soft Brexit" scenario say Britain could retain access to the European single market like non-EU member Norway and allow certain levels of EU immigration.

Sparrring between the two sides is in full force ahead of the scheduled start of complex negoti-

ations with Brussels next week, with a tight timetable that would see Britain leave the EU in March 2019. Setting the tone, Michael Heseltine, a leading pro-European Conservative told the BBC's Andrew Marr Show on Sunday that "hard Brexit" was "the cancer gnawing at the heart of the Conservative Party".

Asked about the possibility of a Norway option, he answered: "We're not going down that route." He also said the government was still open to not accepting a bad deal. "It's important we have the option if it comes down to it to walk away," he said. May's appointment of top Brexit campaigner Michael Gove to the cabinet on Sunday could help bolster the "hard Brexit" view.

Financial Times columnist Wolfgang Munchau warned against overestimating the effect of Britain's election on Brexit strategy, as many of the decisions will depend more on its EU partners. "The degrees of hardness and softness are not unilateral choices to be taken by the UK electorate," he wrote. "The only conclusion I can draw... is that the election has changed absolutely nothing for Brexit". — AFP

### 'Hard Brexit'

Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said on Sunday that the plans were unchanged but added it was "very, very important that we're careful about the existing trade that we do with Europe, about access to the single market". He also said that there should be "some agreement on the immigration that we can accept from Europe". Brexit minister David Davis took a harder tone, however, when he took to the airwaves yesterday. "The reason for leaving the single market is because we want to take back control of our borders. They're not compatible," he told BBC radio.

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### 'Soft Brexit'

In the hours immediately after Thursday's embarrassing election setback for the Conservatives, British media reported that



**LONDON:** Britain's Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Brexit Minister) David Davis arrives to attend a Cabinet meeting at 10 Downing Street in central London yesterday following the June 8 snap general election in which the ruling Conservatives lost their majority. —AFP

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## ITALY'S FIVE STAR SUFFERS SETBACK

**ROME:** Italy's anti-establishment 5-Star Movement suffered a resounding defeat in local elections, results released yesterday even though national polls say it is the country's most popular party. Five-Star candidates came in third or fourth in Parma, Verona, Palermo, L'Aquila, Catanzaro, Lecce, Taranto and Genoa, birthplace of the movement's founder, comic Beppe Grillo. National elections are due in Italy by the first half of next year and could be held as early as this autumn, meaning Sunday's vote in 1,000 towns and cities was an important test of political strength.

Newspaper headlines and pundits pounced on the results, saying the 5-Star might have peaked, but Grillo shot back on yesterday, confidently predicting his group would bounce back. "Everyone is gloating, putting forward rarefied analysis on the death of the 5-Star and the return of a bipolar (political) system," Grillo wrote on his blog. "Convince yourself this is true so you can sleep more soundly. We will continue forward on our path."

The party had hoped to build on last year's election successes, when it took control of 19 large towns and cities, including Rome. But its rule in the capital has been mired in controversy, and its grassroots operations elsewhere have been snarled by internal feuding. Despite its local difficulties, the most recent opinion polls taken ahead of Sunday's vote say the 5-Star would win more than 30 percent in a national race, just ahead of the ruling Democratic Party (PD) led by former prime minister Matteo Renzi.

Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the far-right Northern League - long-time allies but with increasingly diverging political agendas - trail with less than 15 percent each. The center-right fared strongly on Sunday where Forza Italia and the League put aside their divisions and ran together, taking the lead in 13 of the 24 main municipal races. A runoff ballot between the two leading candidates is due on June 25.

The only outright winner in a major city on Sunday was Leoluca Orlando, who led the center-left to



**PALERMO:** Leoluca Orlando celebrates after being elected Palermo mayor early yesterday. —AP

victory in the Sicilian capital Palermo, securing his fifth mandate. An anti-mafia firebrand, Orlando has governed the city for 16 of the past 32 years. Most of the 5-Star candidates would have been new to government. Last year the 5-Star cast its victory in Rome, the nation's capital, as proof it was ready to govern.

But Mayor Virginia Raggi has been dogged by legal scandals since taking office, and she has appeared slow to revive a city hob-

bled by years of corruption and economic decline. Until last week, Italy's main parties had been trying to pass a new proportional electoral law together, but the deal unraveled. Last week, markets appeared wary of more political instability in Italy, which has the euro zone's highest public debt after Greece and has been underperforming, fearing an autumn election could interfere with the presentation of a belt-tightening 2018 budget. —Reuters

## LE PEN'S FAR-RIGHT SURGE LOSES FRANCE MOMENTUM

### PARIS:

Marine Le Pen's far-right National Front suffered a severe setback on Sunday, as her success in reaching the French presidential runoff failed to translate into support in parliamentary polls. Le Pen won 10.7 million votes as she lost to Emmanuel Macron last month, but her party's first-round result on Sunday saw it falling way short of its aim of getting a stronger voice in parliament. The anti-EU, anti-immigration National Front (FN) is on course to win between one and 10 seats in the 577-seat National Assembly in the June 18 runoff. It had been aiming to boost its current two seats to 15.

Le Pen blamed what she called a skewed electoral system that encouraged a record low turnout after projections showed that FN candidates scored between 13 and 14 percent of the vote. She pointed to the fact that only around 49 percent of the electorate cast a ballot on Sunday - the lowest level in a parliamentary election in France for six decades. "This catastrophic abstention rate should raise the question of the voting rules which keep millions of our compatriots away from the polling stations," the 48-year-old said.

FN vice president Florian Philippot said the party had "maybe been disappointed by the score and we have paid the price, I think, for a low turnout". The lion's share of the vote, as expected, went to the new centrist party of 39-year-old President Emmanuel Macron, *Republique en Marche* (Republic on the Move, REM), which could win as many as 445 seats. The FN had set the 15-seat goal in order to qualify as a parliamentary group, a status that gives a party more clout in the National Assembly with seats on committees and a role in setting the agenda.

### 'We are real opposition'

The FN leader is currently a lawmaker in the European Parliament but is hoping to win a legislative seat in France for the first time. She at least made it easily into



**Marine Le Pen**

the run-off in the northern town of Henin-Beaumont against 12 rivals and will fight a political novice from Macron's party, Anne Roquet. Lise Trolin, a 32-year-old saleswoman who was among around 200 FN party stalwarts who gathered to watch the results in the depressed former mining town, tried to put a brave face on the national result. "It's not a failure," she told AFP. "We will be the only opposition force in the assembly because the Macron government is a melting pot of all the other parties. We will be the only force with enough guts to challenge Macron."

Pensioner Marie-Christine Laversin, 57, said while she was disappointed, she thought FN voters would turn out in greater numbers next Sunday. "People don't realize that what they can expect with Emmanuel Macron is that very well-off people will become even wealthier and the poor will get poorer. What I fear a bit with Macron is, if the FN is not in the assembly, we're done for."

Le Pen and the FN have benefitted from a confluence of factors including the 2015 migrant crisis and the string of jihadist attacks that have hit France. The party has a particular populist appeal in France's northern rustbelt, which is dotted with shut-down factories and mines. In the presidential vote, Le Pen aimed to capitalise on the same rejection of traditional politics that swept Donald Trump to the White House and sparked Britain's vote to leave the EU.

She was roundly criticized for a poor performance in a brutal TV debate with Macron days before the presidential runoff that potentially cost her votes. "The National Front has not recovered from the period between the two rounds (of the presidential election) and its successive mess-ups," *Brice Teinturier* of the Ipsos polling institute said on France 2 TV. Le Pen has spent the past six years since taking charge of the FN trying to expunge the xenophobic, anti-Semitic ethos engendered by her father Jean-Marie Le Pen, who co-founded the party in 1972. Under Marine Le Pen, the FN has consistently improved its electoral scores, notching up records in past regional, European Parliament and presidential elections. — AFP

## FRENCH SOCIALISTS FACE 'UNPRECEDENTED' LOSSES

**PARIS:** For France's Socialists, the pain keeps getting worse. After five years in power under ex-president Francois Hollande, the party now faces a battle to survive after a historic drubbing in parliamentary elections. Projections on Sunday showed it crashing to 15-40 MPs in the new national assembly from 277 currently. Even party boss Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, a 20-year veteran of parliament, lost his seat along with a host of senior figures and former ministers. Cambadélis said the results were "an unprecedented retreat of the left as a whole and the PS (Socialist Party) in particular".

If the projections are confirmed by a second-round of voting next weekend, the collapse would be even worse than in 1993 when the party fell to 56 seats from 278 at the latter end of Socialist president Francois Mitterrand's second term. The reasons are multiple, foremost among them the historic unpopularity of Hollande after his five-year term in power which was marked by high unemployment, terror attacks and infighting in the party. At one point, his approval rating hit 4.0 percent.

The left also went into Sunday's elections deeply divided, with the Socialists, the new far-left party France Insoumise (France Unbound) and the Communist party fielding rival candidates in many constituencies. Opposite them were new faces from President Emmanuel Macron's centrist party *Republique En Marche* (Republic on the Move, REM) who have siphoned away centre-left voters.

### A 'tornado'

Julien Dray, a senior Socialist leader, said it was "a profound political crisis. Firstly we'll have to see the second round... we need to keep fighting and afterwards we



**Jean-Christophe Cambadélis**

will need to rework completely what was the Socialist identity." The party has gone backwards in every national election since Hollande came to power in 2012, but the presidential election last month and this weekend's parliamentary vote has laid bare the level of disaffection. "The tornado was too strong... the two elections were too close to allow us to really recover," Cambadélis added on Sunday.

In the presidential election, Socialist candidate Benoit Hamon scored a humiliating 6.3 percent in the first round on April 23 after a campaign during which many party heavyweights abandoned him. He also lost his seat on Sunday. Others from the outgoing government to suffer the ignominy of a first-round exit included former interior minister Matthias Fekl and ex-culture minister Aurelie Filippetti. The party has already raised the possibility of having to sell its headquarters in central Paris as it haemorrhages donations and public subsidies which are essential to keep it afloat.

"The results for the Socialists need to be looked at with clarity and we will need to draw the right conclusions," former Socialist prime minister Bernard Cazeneuve said in a statement, adding that the party would need to be "rebuilt on a healthy and renovated basis". During Hollande's term, a profound ideological split in the party between traditional leftwingers attached to the power of the state and more pro-market centrists frequently surfaced and remains unresolved. — AFP