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Focus

'MACRON-MANIA' PROMPTS TALK OF HERD MENTALITY

By Adam Plowright

The theory has been aired several times over the last week: French voters are so desperate for change and for new President Emmanuel Macron to succeed that they are blindly electing his party's candidates to parliament. Polls suggest that Macron's Republic on the Move (REM) party and its allies are set to win up to 470 seats out of 577 in parliamentary elections yesterday, one of the biggest majorities in decades.

Political analyst Christophe Barbier suggested after the first round of voting in parliamentary elections a week ago that "you could take a goat and give it Macron's endorsement and it would have a good chance of being elected." Senior left-wing journalist Edwy Plenel expressed the same sentiment, saying that even "donkeys" would be carried to power by the Macron wave such was its force. "Absolute power is a danger," he warned. In line with the 39-year-old's presidential campaign pledges, around half of REM's candidates are newcomers to politics drawn from diverse fields of academia, business or local activism. Around half are women. The result is likely to be a national assembly that is younger, more female and more ethnically diverse than ever before.

But also more inexperienced and perhaps less willing to stand up to the all-powerful president. Defeated candidates in last weekend's voting also took up the animal-themed commentary about the strength of anti-establishment feeling and support for Macron's candidates. Eduardo Rihan Cypel, a defeated Socialist from northern France, said a REM-sponsored "hippopotamus" would have beaten him in his constituency. Party colleague Alexis Bachelay sniffed that a Macron-aligned "field mouse" could get 40 percent in the current climate.

Desire for change

In some areas in Paris, stickers of goats have been placed on the posters of REM candidates outside polling stations, while right-wing opponents online have taken up the theme on Twitter. One target this week was Olivia Gregoire who is standing for a seat from a constituency in wealthy southwest Paris and whose posters, like most REM candidates, feature Macron's face prominently.

The entrepreneur looks on course for victory yesterday after winning 47 percent in the first round of the parliamentary election last week against veteran rightwinger Philippe Goujon who has held the seat since 2007. "The desire for change is really strong, which means that people have less concern about voting for someone they don't know," said Romain Perron, a 33-year-old who works in finance, after casting his vote.

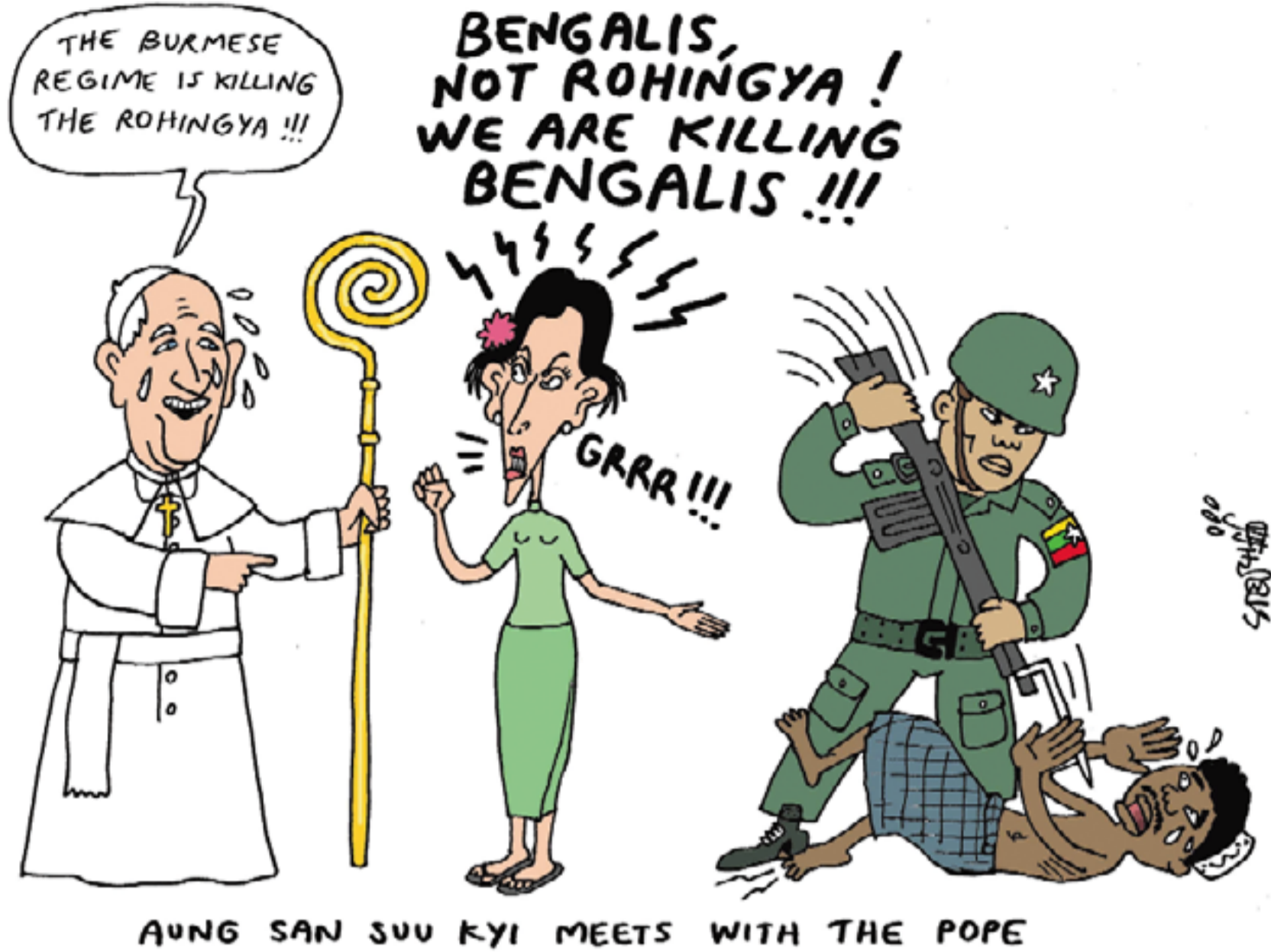
Macron's success has been partly built on the overwhelming desire of voters to cast out the familiar faces of France's political class who are blamed for years of low growth, corruption, social tensions and high unemployment. The former investment banker was unknown three years ago and only started his political movement in April last year, promising to modernize France's social security system and promote entrepreneurship. Other supporters said that the animal comparisons were condescending towards voters and ignored the fact that other presidents won huge majorities in 1968, 1981 or 2002.

"We are in a system that offers a majority to the president once he's elected," said Sandrine, a 48-year-old civil servant. Following a referendum in 2000, France's electoral calendar was modified to place the parliamentary polls immediately after the presidential one with the explicit aim of giving the new president a working majority. "It should give him the chance to reform and our country needs reforms," Sandrine added. Furthermore, many REM candidates—especially those in rural constituencies—are known locally, living in the area or working for local associations.

Macron hegemony?

Others are not convinced, worried that Macron will have too much power and face no scrutiny from a parliament packed with loyalists who owe their election success to him. Samuel Sharifzadeh, a 66-year-old voting in southwest Paris, said he backed Macron in the presidential election but supported an opposition figure yesterday to encourage a counterweight in parliament. Retired businessman Patrick Depardon, 65, said he was dismayed at the prospect of sitting MPs with a good track record being voted, merely to fulfill the desire for renewal. "We're throwing the baby out with the bathwater," Depardon said. —AFP

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'SOMBER' BRITAIN PREPARES FOR HISTORIC BREXIT TALKS

By Dario Thuburn

Britain begins historic talks today on leaving the European Union while still mourning the victims of a devastating fire and reeling from an election that has badly weakened the government. Brexit minister David Davis will travel to Brussels to meet Michel Barnier, the EU's chief negotiator, to kick off hugely complex withdrawal negotiations that are expected to conclude within two years. Worried by immigration and loss of sovereignty, Britain last year voted to end its decades-old membership of the 28-country bloc—the first state ever to do so in a shock referendum result.

The government has developed a strategy of so-called "hard Brexit": Leaving the European single market and the customs union in order to control immigration from the EU. But that entire approach has come under question following the June 8 general election in which Prime Minister Theresa May lost her centre-right Conservative party's parliamentary majority. May has clung on to power but has so far failed to conclude an agreement with Northern Ireland's ultra-conservative Democratic Unionist Party that would bolster her ability to govern.

The Conservatives now have only 317 MPs in the 650-seat House of Commons and need the support of the DUP's 10 MPs to command a razor-thin majority. The government is due to present its legislative program at the opening of parliament on Wednesday, which will be followed by a key confidence vote several days later. Adding

to what Queen Elizabeth II called the "sombre national mood" have been three terrorist attacks in three months and a fire in a London tower block in which 58 people are presumed dead.

Softer strategy on Brexit?

The government's current weakness has fuelled criticism of its approach to Brexit and given rise to notions that the government might pursue a softer tone. Some Conservatives have called for a more inclusive approach that would include opposition parties as well as stronger voices from Scotland and Northern Ireland, where a majority of voters backed Britain to stay in the EU. Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson, who is newly influential after winning a crucial 13 seats in Scotland, has said Britain should prioritize "freedom to trade and our economic growth".

But finance minister Philip Hammond confirmed Sunday that Britain would still be leaving the EU, the single market and the customs union. "We will leave the customs union when we leave the European Union. That's a statement of legal fact," he told BBC television. He said he wanted post-Brexit trade with the EU that was not just free from tariffs but also delays and bureaucracy. But Hammond said transitional arrangements would be necessary, to give business greater certainty. "If we're going to radically change the way we work together, we need to get there via a slope, not via a cliff edge," he said.

'Broadest possible consensus'

Today's negotiations are to start in Brussels at 11 am with 90 minutes of talks between Barnier and Davis, followed by a working lunch between the pair, and a press conference. Working groups will be set up to focus on three key areas—the status of EU citizens living in Britain and British citizens living in the EU; the divorce bill for Britain; and the future of the Northern Irish border with EU member Ireland. Britain and the EU are already at odds over the order of the talks, with London insisting future trade ties should be discussed at the same time as the divorce despite opposition from Brussels. And Hammond described the divorce bill figures being bandied around in Brussels as "the most egregious pre-negotiation posturing". The negotiations have been called the most complex in Britain's history as it unravels 44 years of membership and its threat to walk out with no deal in place has worried European capitals.

No deal would be "very, very bad" for Britain, Hammond said, but worse would be a deal "deliberately structured to punish us, to suck the lifeblood out of our economy". The chancellor said he would reject any deal "designed to destroy us". The government on Saturday said parliament would hold a special two-year session starting this week, sitting for double the normal time to allow it to overhaul EU legislation. International Trade Minister Liam Fox will travel to Washington today to explore new trade ties—although no formal negotiations are possible until Britain has actually left the bloc. —AFP

TABOO-BREAKING LIBERAL MOSQUE OPENS IN BERLIN

With a mission to spread a liberal form of Islam, a mosque where men and women pray side by side has opened its doors in Berlin, complete with female imams. The Arabic phrase "Allahu Akbar" ("God is greatest") resonated through the crowded Ibn-Rushd-Goethe-Mosque Friday as US-Malaysian Ani Zonneveld, one of the world's few female imams, launched the call to prayer. Then one of the founders of the new place of worship, lawyer and women's rights activist Seyran Ates, opened the event with words of welcome before Christian and Jewish guests and a large media contingent.

"We want to send a signal against Islamic terror and the misuse of our religion," said Turkish-born Ates, 54, dressed in a long white robe. "We want to practice our religion together." Ates—no stranger to breaking taboos, having called for a "sexual revolution" in the Muslim world—vowed she would not allow ultra-conservatives "to rob me of my right to be Muslim". Kneeling on green carpets, the faithful—men and women, side by side—bowed to Mecca for the traditional prayer as the imam spoke in German. Some of the women wore veils or head coverings, others did not.

'Depoliticise' Islam

The new mosque, the 88th in the German capital, is located in a rented room on the third floor of the Protestant Johanniskirche (St. John's Church) building. All Muslims—Sunni or Shia, Alawite or Sufi—are welcome in the mosque named after one of Germany's greatest writers, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and 12th century Islamic scholar Ibn Rushd, also known as Averroes. The seven founding members said they want to open their prayer hall to all groups, including gays and lesbians.

"This mosque allows Muslims to define themselves in a new way," said co-founder and German Islam scholar Abdel-Hakim Ourghi. He added that "we will try to depoliticize Islam", as the religion was being torn by rival political movements. "Because religion is a private matter." Police stood guard outside the entrance of the building. The founders said they had not received any threats or insults, but that they fully expected not everyone would be happy.

Germany, with some four million Muslims, has been the target of jihadist attacks, the deadliest last December when a truck tore through a Berlin Christmas market crowd killing 12 people. The arrival of more than one million refugees, most from mainly Muslim countries, since 2015 has worsened the fears of some Germans. Ates—who has

campaigns against forced marriages, domestic violence and so-called "honor killings" among Muslim migrants—said the project was eight years in the making.

"Many left along the way," she said. "They told us it was dangerous, that they were afraid." Elham Manea, a Swiss political scientist of Yemeni background, said the time had come for change, with other so-called

liberal mosques having also opened in the United States, Britain and Switzerland. The Berlin mosque, financed by private donations, is located in the Berlin district of Moabit, which has a large immigrant population. It was in this neighborhood that Tunisian Anis Amri, the Christmas market attacker, frequented a radical mosque that has since been closed. —AFP



COLOGNE: Two girls stand next to a banner citing the Quran and reading 'Make peace among the people' as they take part in a so-called 'Ramadan Peace March' of Muslims and friends against terrorism and violence in Cologne, western Germany yesterday. —AFP