

SINGAPOREANS PROTEST AGAINST UNCONTESTED ELECTION

SINGAPORE: Hundreds of Singaporeans, most dressed in black, held a silent protest yesterday against an uncontested presidential election this week in which applications from four candidates were rejected. Political protests are rare in the wealthy city-state but the election of Halimah Yacob, a former speaker of parliament, as the country's first woman president had led to some dismay over how other prospective candidates were rejected.

"ROBBED OF AN ELECTION #NotMyPresident", read a banner at the entrance to the park where the protest was held, a venue called Speakers' Corner, which has been designated as the site in the city for people to air their views. "We care about the country and where it's heading toward," said 22-year-old Anna, who declined to give her last name.

"This is an issue that I feel especially strongly about," she said, adding that the power of authorities "had gone unchecked". She said it was the first time she had attended a protest. If the election had been held, all citizens above the age of 21 would have been eligible to vote. Aiming to strengthen a sense of inclusivity, multicultural Singapore had decreed the presidency, a largely ceremonial six-year post, would be reserved for candidates from the minority Malay community this time.

Of the four other applicants for the presidency, two were not Malays and two were not qualified to contest, the elections department said on Monday. Halimah had automatically qualified because she held a senior public post for over

three years and was declared elected after nominations closed on Wednesday. The stringent eligibility rules include a stipulation that a candidate from the private sector should have headed a company with paid-up capital of at least S\$500 million (\$370 million). Organizers of yesterday's protest said it was silent as speeches that touched on race and religion would have needed a police permit.

Tan Cheng Bock, who lost the previous presidential election in 2011, said in a Facebook post: "It is not President Halimah as a person that Singaporeans are unhappy about. It is about the way our government has conducted this whole walkover presidential election." Displays of dissent are unusual in Singapore, one of the richest and most politically stable countries in the world. It has been ruled by the People's Action Party (PAP) since independence in 1965 and the current Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, is the son of the country's founding father Lee Kuan Yew.

In the 2015 general election - held months after the death of Lee Kuan Yew - the PAP won almost 70 per cent of the popular vote and swept all but six of parliament's 89 seats. But it was the third gathering of so many people at the Speakers' Corner since the beginning of July. The annual Pink Dot gay pride rally drew thousands of people to the site on July 1. And in mid-July, a protest was held at the venue calling for an independent inquiry into whether Lee abused his power in a battle with his siblings over what to do with their late father's house. — Reuters



SINGAPORE: Singapore's former presidential candidate Tan Cheng Bock (center), who lost narrowly in the previous election, is mobbed by supporters at Hong Lim Park in Singapore yesterday. Hundreds of Singaporeans angered by the walkover victory of its first female president gathered in a downtown park yesterday for a 'silent sit-in' in a rare political protest denouncing the lack of an election. — AFP



KABUL: An Afghan Shiite man kisses the holy mace for blessings at the Karti Sakhi shrine in Kabul, Afghanistan. — AP

IRAN RECRUITING PAKISTANI AND AFGHAN SHIITES TO FIGHT IN SYRIA

ISLAMABAD: Thousands of Shiite Muslims from Afghanistan and Pakistan are being recruited by Iran to fight with President Bashar Al-Assad's forces in Syria, lured by promises of housing, a monthly salary of up to \$600 and the possibility of employment in Iran when they return, say counterterrorism officials and analysts. These fighters, who have received public praise from Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, even have their own brigades, but counterterrorism officials in both countries worry about the mayhem they might cause when they return home to countries already wrestling with a major militant problem.

Amir Toumaj, Iran research analyst at the US-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, said the number of fighters is fluid but as many as 6,000 Afghans are fighting for Assad, while the number of Pakistanis, who fight under the banner of the Zainabayoun Brigade, is in the hundreds. In Afghanistan, stepped-up attacks on minority Shiites claimed by the upstart Islamic State group affiliate known as Islamic State in the Khorasan Province could be payback against Afghan Shiites in Syria fighting under the banner of the Fatimayoun Brigade, Toumaj said.

Expecting blowback

Khorasan is an ancient name for an area that included parts of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. "People were expecting blowback," said Toumaj. IS "itself has its own strategy to inflame sectarian strife." Shiites in Afghanistan are frightened. Worshipers at a recent Friday prayer service said Shiite mosques in the Afghan capital, including the largest, Ibrahim Khalil mosque, were barely a third full. Previously on Fridays - the Islamic holy day - the faithful were so many that the overflow often spilled out on the street outside the mosque.

Mohammed Naim, a Shiite restaurant owner in Kabul issued a plea to Iran: "Please don't send the poor Afghan Shiite refugees to fight in Syria because then Daesh attacks directly on Shiites," he said, using an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State. Pakistan has also been targeted by the

Islamic State in Khorasan province. IS has claimed several brutal attacks on the country's Shiite community, sending suicide bombers to shrines they frequent, killing scores of devotees.

In Pakistan, sectarian rivalries routinely erupt in violence. The usual targets are the country's minority Shiites, making them willing recruits, said Toumaj. The most fertile recruitment ground for Iran has been Parachinar, the regional capital of the Khurram tribal region, that borders Afghanistan, he said. There, Shiites have been targeted by suicide bombings carried out by Sunni militants, who revile Shiites as heretics.

Suicide bombings

In June, two suicide bombings in rapid succession killed nearly 70 people prompting nationwide demonstrations, with protesters carrying banners shouting: "Stop the genocide of Shiites." A Pakistani intelligence official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to speak to the media, said recruits are also coming from northern Gilgit and Baltistan. Recruiters are often Shiite clerics with ties to Iran, some of whom have studied in seminaries in Iran's Qom and Mashhad cities, said a second Pakistani official, who also spoke on condition he not be identified because he still operates in the area and exposing his identity would endanger him.

Yet fighters sign up for many reasons. Some are inspired to go to Syria to protect sites considered holy to Shiite Muslims, like the shrine honoring Sayyida Zainab, the granddaughter of Islam's Prophet Muhammed. Located in the Syrian capital of Damascus, the shrine was attacked by Syrian rebels in 2013. Others sign up for the monthly stipend and the promise of a house. For those recruited from among the more than 1 million Afghan refugees still living in Iran it's often the promise of permanent residence in Iran. For Shiites in Pakistan's Parachinar it is outrage at the relentless attacks by Sunni militants that drives them to sign up for battle in Syria, said Toumaj. — AP

EU-US DATA PACT FACES FIRST TEST OF CREDIBILITY

PRIVACY SHIELD IN FORCE FOR A YEAR

BRUSSELS: A pact underpinning billions of dollars of transatlantic data transfers will undergo its first annual review tomorrow, with Europe seeking to ensure Washington has lived up to its promises to protect the data of European citizens stored on US servers. Feted as a milestone in transatlantic relations, which had soured after revelations of mass US surveillance four years ago, the EU-US Privacy Shield data pact has been in place for just over a year.

It was hammered out after the European Union's top court struck down a previous data transfer pact in 2015 because it allowed US spies excessive access to people's data, plunging everyday cross-border data transfers into legal limbo. However, it is already subject to two legal challenges in European courts on the grounds that it does not offer adequate privacy protections for European citizens' data, and EU data protection watchdogs have also expressed misgivings.

The first annual review taking place tomorrow and Tuesday will be an opportunity for the European Commission, which negotiated the Privacy Shield, to ensure it is functioning well

and that the US administration is keeping its part of the deal. "My expectation is that we will find Privacy Shield functioning, we might find some space or room for improvement," Vera Jourova, EU Justice Commissioner, told Reuters in an interview.

Ombudsman

The Privacy Shield seeks to strengthen the protection of Europeans whose data is moved to US servers by giving EU citizens greater means to seek redress in case of disputes, including through a new privacy ombudsman within the State Department who will deal with complaints from EU citizens about US spying. However a new ombudsman has not been appointed under the new US administration, something Jourova said she will push for. Companies wanting to transfer Europeans' personal data outside the bloc have to comply with tough EU data protection rules which forbid them from transferring personal data to countries deemed to have inadequate privacy protections unless they have special legal contracts in place.

The Privacy Shield allows firms to move data across the Atlantic without relying on such contracts, known as model clauses, which are more cumbersome and expensive. Over 2,400 companies are signed up to the scheme including Alphabet Inc's Google, Facebook and Microsoft. "Virtually every transaction in the trillion-euro transatlantic trade relationship, from the movement of services and capital to the movement of goods and people, heavily relies on the transfer of data between the EU and US," said Thomas Boue, Director General, Policy, EMEA for BSA, which represents the likes of Apple, Microsoft and IBM.

The Commission is also seeking to find out figures for how many requests for people's data companies had received from US authorities. "The million dollar question was how many times they were asked by the national secret service," Jourova said. "This is of big relevance for assessing whether Privacy Shield is successful." The Commission will produce a report with its conclusions on the review of the Privacy Shield in October. — Reuters



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PROSECUTOR RENEWS INTEREST IN LONG ISLAND SERIAL KILLER CASE

MINEOLA: For years, the thicket along a beach highway on Long Island held a horrible secret. Hidden from passing drivers were the skeletal remains of 10 people, mostly young women who had worked as prostitutes. Who killed them, and why, is a mystery that has vexed a slew of seasoned homicide detectives. The case took an intriguing turn when a veteran county prosecutor became the first authority to publicly name a suspect in at least one of the deaths: John Bittrolff, a Long Island carpenter who was sentenced to consecutive 25 years-to-life terms in prison this week for beating two prostitutes to death in 1993 and 1994.

Robert Biancavilla, an assistant district attorney in Suffolk County, said after the sentencing that some of the remains found near Gilgo Beach "may be attributed to the handiwork of Mr Bittrolff." If authorities have evidence to back up their suspicions, though, they aren't saying. Biancavilla declined to elaborate. Suffolk County police officials declined to comment. They last spoke publicly about the case nearly two years ago when they announced detectives were working with FBI profilers

on developing leads. Any suggestion that Bittrolff had anything to do with the dead women is "laughable," said his lawyer, Jonathan Manley. Even a lawyer for the family of one of those linked to the case expressed skepticism. "To stir this pot when there's no evidence is looking to easily blame a convicted killer and not have to perform the investigation that is required," said John Ray, an attorney for the family of Shannan Gilbert, whose disappearance in 2010 several miles from Gilgo Beach triggered the hunt that exposed the larger mystery. Gilbert, a 24-year-old sex worker, vanished in spring 2010 after leaving a client's house on foot and disappearing into the marsh.

Months later, a police officer and his cadaver dog were looking for her body in the thicket along Ocean Parkway when they happened upon the remains of a different woman. Within days, three other bodies were found, all within a short walk of one another. By spring 2011, that number had climbed to 10 sets of human remains - those of eight women, one man and one toddler - all found along several miles of parkway. — AP