

International

New Nigeria versus old as governor cuts emir's power

Worries about power struggles ahead

KANO, Nigeria: When the emir of Kano returned from pilgrimage this month, dancing supporters lined the streets to welcome a monarch commanding millions as one of Nigeria's principal Islamic leaders. For years, the Emir of Kano, Muhammadu Sanusi II, has inherited an ancient title in northern Nigeria that gave him power over an area the size of Israel with the population of Portugal. But this month his power was cut, in a clash between traditional rule and formal government in Africa's most populous nation that has some worried about power struggles ahead. The local governor carved up Kano emirate creating four new emirs - and Sanusi's funds from state government were split among them in what critics say was a bid to curb his influence. "Kano's pre-eminence as an emirate is dented," said Sule Bello, a history professor from Nigeria's Ahmadu Bello University. "The new emirates will cause the influence and the prestige of the traditional institution to be whittled away." In a changing Nigeria, it is a test case of tensions between governance styles old and new, experts say, that could have wide-reaching impact on other areas of the country.

'Power struggles'

Kano state governor Abdullahi Umar Ganduje is the man who signed the new emirs into law. Ganduje was narrowly re-elected in February and sees Sanusi as pro-opposition - but insists he just wants to make traditional institutions more accountable. "It is not a vendetta," Ganduje told reporters. "I'm not against him." But others worry it is a divide-and-rule policy that could lead to conflict. A group of activists, powerful politicians and academics from northern Nigeria calling themselves the "Friends of Democracy", said they were worried about potential violence. Creating new emirs means the "politicization of

traditional authority", the group said. "The situation will lead to power struggles for the throne among the different ruling clans in the new emirates," said Bello, a former head of the National Council for Arts and Culture.

Scholar and critic

Sanusi, an Islamic scholar, is the 14th emir following centuries of rule. But the 57-year-old straddles two very different worlds; a leader of an ancient monarchy, he was once the governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria - a critical role in Africa's biggest oil producer. In that post, he earned a reputation as a straight-talking leader, not afraid to speak out against corruption, although he faced - and denied - accusations of graft himself.

He became emir in 2014, selected by elders and then confirmed by the governor, after inheriting the post from his great-uncle. A modernist reformer, he has also spoken out against traditions of marrying multiple wives and having several children if the man cannot support the family, angering some Islamic leaders.

Loyalty to the emir remains strong. Many ordinary people have grown skeptical of democratic systems they see as rigged, and where elected officials treat public cash as their own private funds. Traditional powers, viewed as the holders of ancient cultural powers passed down through the centuries, still have major influence. As an Islamic leader in a state with sharia law in majority Muslim northern Nigeria, it is a powerful post. "I grew up to revere the emir," said Saratu Bature, a mother, who cried at the news of the changes, fearing it could weaken an ancient system of stability. "The emir has been a source of unity among our people," she said. "The new decision will destroy all that." Many people are unhappy. "The creation of new emirates in Kano was done in bad faith... the gover-



KANO, Nigeria: In this file photo taken on June 25, 2017, Emir of Kano Muhammadu Sanusi II departs on horseback from the Eid prayer ground after prayers to mark the end of the holy month of Ramadan and the start of Eid al-Fitr festival. — AFP

nor has politicized his personal problem with the emir," said Mansur Ibrahim, a textile trader in Kano. "Breaking it into smaller emirates will no doubt distort our history, culture and tradition."

Show of power

Supporters of the emir of Kano see the new law as a way to reduce his influence in the state. "Dismembering the emirate is nothing but destroying it," said teacher Umar Habu. "We all know the governor and the emir have differences, but instead of fighting the emir, the governor is destroying the royal institution. He is throwing away the

baby and the bathwater." The move to cut Sanusi's powers was made while he was in Saudi Arabia on pilgrimage to Makkah.

Neither Sanusi nor his courtiers have made a statement on the issue - but when he returned to Nigeria, his arrival reception was held with extra flair. Supporters fired muskets into the air, as the emir drove through the city in a white Rolls-Royce, dressed in his finery of embroidered robes and turban. It was a very visible display of power. As a message, it could not have been clearer: the emir is here to stay. —AFP

Economic warfare plays out as Libyans battle for capital

TRIPOLI: While rival Libyan forces fight for control of the capital, an economic war is playing out which could have grave and lasting consequences for the oil-rich country. Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands wounded since the battle for Tripoli erupted on April 4, when commander Khalifa Haftar launched an assault to take the city. While fighters loyal to the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) have held Haftar's fighters at bay in the Tripoli suburbs, both sides have economic weapons to use against their rival.

Haftar is backed by a parallel administration in the east, the stronghold of his self-styled Libyan National Army, while his forces also control the country's most important oil fields. But his ability to exploit such resource wealth is limited as the production is managed by the Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation (NOC), while the revenues are channelled through the central bank in the capital. "(Haftar) notes that all the oil money goes mostly to the west, that's what upped the political divisions in Libya since the east is historically considered abandoned by the west," a European diplomat said on condition of anonymity.

Between 2017 and 2018, the parallel authorities in the east tried to sell oil without passing through Tripoli, but the international community - and in particular

Washington - thwarted such efforts. The United Nations envoy to Libya, Ghassan Salame, said Tuesday there are indications the eastern branch of the NOC is "again attempting to export oil in violation of the sanctions regime". "This illegal attempt risks dividing the National Oil Company, which remains the primary source of revenue for the country, and the national social safety net," he told the UN Security Council.

Jalel Harchaoui, a researcher at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, said it remains "very probably that the pro-Haftar faction will attempt to sell oil (directly) on the international market". Such sales could be "tacitly tolerated by the White House". US President Donald Trump spoke to Haftar by phone in mid-April, a move which was widely perceived to indicate his support for the Libyan commander despite Washington not taking an official stance.

Haftar is unlikely to hold up exports, said Harchaoui, as the United States is pushing to maintain global oil output following a drop in exports from Venezuela and Iran. But if the Trump administration were to publicly confirm its support for the GNA, "the Haftar camp could panic" and block oil exports, according to Harchaoui.

The GNA, led by Fayed Al-Sarraj, is already using its control of the central bank to weaken Haftar's forces. Tripoli oversees civil servant salaries for the entire country and, after Haftar launched his assault on the city, Sarraj vowed to cut payments to those who had joined the LNA. The central bank went further still at the end of last month, limiting access to capital in its banks in eastern Libya while citing "irregularities" found at the financial institutions in question.

A parallel central bank under the rival eastern adminis-



TRIPOLI: Fighters loyal to the Libyan internationally-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) gesture near the frontline during clashes against forces loyal to strongman Khalifa Haftar on Tuesday in the Salah al-Din area. —AFP

tration, meanwhile, criticized the "unequal distribution" of revenues. It slammed a "regional war targeting the banks of Benghazi", the main city in eastern Libya. The administration in the country's east could struggle to pay its employees and Haftar's forces if Tripoli's central bank tightened its measures against them, International Crisis Group said Monday. "This in turn could prompt Haftar to cut oil exports from areas he controls and ignite an economic war," the organization said in its report. "This would deepen the de facto split between east and west... and possibly become a prelude to partition," it added. —AFP

Deposed Istanbul mayor blasts 'lies' used to annul election

ISTANBUL: Istanbul's deposed mayor Ekrem Imamoglu said yesterday that no one believed the "lies" used to overturn his recent election and called on voters to "correct this great shame" in next month's re-run. "Nobody believes their claims," Imamoglu said at a meeting in Istanbul to launch his re-election campaign.



Ekrem Imamoglu

He accused President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party of peddling "lies" and "excuses" to overturn his narrow victory in the mayoral election in March. "When I look at their facial expressions, I see that they themselves do not believe them either," Imamoglu said.

The election board earlier this month accepted the ruling party's allegations of "irregularities" and called a re-run of the vote for June 23. Imamoglu's victory for the opposition of the Republican People's Party (CHP) was the first time Erdogan's Islamic-conservative party and its predecessors had lost control of the metropolis in 25 years.

Analysts say the government is reluctant to cede control of Turkey's biggest city, which provides its mayor with significant resources for patronage as well as a high-profile platform. "We will show the whole of Turkey on June 23 that there is no way out other than democracy and the ballot box," Imamoglu said. "Come and let's correct this great shame and unfairness all together." Imamoglu said his campaign would focus on reversing extravagant spending in the city's finances which he said he discovered during his brief 18-day stint as mayor.

"The resources of Istanbul municipality are being plundered... Istanbul municipality is not the property of a handful of people," he said. The opposition candidate also accused the ruling party of copying his proposals, including reduced water bills and discounted student transport, saying it was like a school-boy copying his homework. —AFP

Deadly strike hits market as Damascus battles militants

MAARET AL-NUMAN, Syria: Syrian government air strikes killed 15 civilians, 12 of them in a market, as fierce fighting raged for the jihadist-held northwest, a monitor said yesterday. Government forces battled to repel a militant counteroffensive around the town of Kafr Nabuda that has left more than 50 combatants dead in 24 hours, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. The Hayat Tahrir al-Sham alliance, led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, controls a large part of Idlib province as well as adjacent slivers of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia provinces.

The jihadist-dominated region is nominally protected by a buffer zone deal, but the government and its Russian ally have escalated their bombardment in recent weeks, seizing several towns on its southern flank. At least 12 people were killed and another 18 wounded when the warplanes hit the jihadist-held Idlib province town of Maaret al-Numan around midnight (2100 GMT) on Tuesday, the Observatory said. The market was crowded with people out and about after breaking the daytime fast observed by Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan.

The bombardment blew in the facades of surrounding buildings, and ripped through the flimsy frames and canvas of stalls in the market square, an AFP photographer reported. The bodies of market-goers were torn apart. "Residents are still scared," stallholder Khaled Ahmad told AFP. Two more civilians were killed on Wednesday in air strikes on nearby Maaret Herme, the Observatory said. An third was killed in strikes on the town of Jisr al-Shughur, it added.

The strikes came as heavy clashes raged in neighboring Hama province after the militants launched a counterattack on Tuesday. Fresh fighting yesterday took the death toll to 52 - 29 troops and militia and 23 jihadists, the Observatory said. It said the jihadists had retaken most of Kafr Nabuda from government forces, who had recaptured the town on May 8. Russia and rebel ally Turkey inked the buffer zone deal in September to avert a government offensive on the region and protect its three million residents.

But President Bashar Al-Assad's government upped its bombardment of the region after HTS took control



HAMA, Syria: Syrian First Lady Asma Al-Assad poses for a selfie with patients at the center for prosthetic limbs in this central city yesterday. — AFP

in January. Russia too has stepped up its air strikes in recent weeks. The Observatory says nearly 200 civilians have been killed in the flare-up since April 30. The United Nations said yesterday that Idlib's civilian population once again faced the threat of an all-out offensive. "Despite our repeated warnings, our worst fears are coming true," said David Swanson, a spokesman for the UN humanitarian office. "A full military incursion threatens to trigger a humanitarian catastrophe for over 3 million civilians caught in the crossfire, as well as overwhelm our ability to respond."

Swanson said more than 200,000 people have been displaced by the upsurge of violence since April 28. A total of 20 health facilities have been hit by the escalation - 19 of which remain out of service, Swanson said. Collectively they served at least 200,000 people, he added. The September deal was never fully implemented as militants refused to withdraw from a planned buffer zone around the Idlib region. But it ushered in a relative drop in violence until earlier this year, with Turkish troops deploying to observation points around the region. The Syrian government has accused Turkey of failing to secure implementation of the truce deal by the jihadists. But Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar accused the Syrian regime late Tuesday of threatening the ceasefire deal. "The regime is doing all that it can to break the status quo including using barrel bombs, land and air offensives," Akar told reporters. "Turkish armed forces will not take a step back from wherever they may be," he however added. —AFP

Syrians displaced in the northwest call on Turkey to open border

ATMEH, Syria: Camped on the Turkish border to escape bombardment by Russian and Syrian government forces, many displaced Syrians are angry and frustrated that Turkey has not done more to protect them from the bombs or let them cross the frontier to safety. The border wall a few hundred metres away offers a degree of cover for thousands of people, since air strikes are rare so close to Turkey. But it also blocks any chance they have of fleeing the conflict and joining millions of refugees abroad.

"Turkey is our only option today," said Abu Abdallah, 51, who left his village at the start of the war in 2011 to seek sanctuary near the town of Qalaat al-Madiq, until it was captured by Syrian government forces in early May. "We can no longer put up with living under bombardment or in the open under the trees," said Abu Abdallah, one of thousands of Syrians living in white tents dotted around the rock-strewn olive groves, some of them only 50 metres (yards) from the border.

Some 180,000 people were displaced by the recent attacks in northwest Syria, the last major rebel stronghold. The increase in shelling killed dozens of people and marked the most intense period of violence for months between President Bashar Al-Assad and the rebels, who launched a counter-attack last week. The Syrian government says it is responding to attacks by Al-Qaeda-linked militants. The dominant insurgent faction in the region is the jihadist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), although the army offensive has not focused on the central Idlib area where it is most concentrated, an HTS-aligned opposition figure said.

Much of the bombardment has hit a buffer zone around Idlib province and surrounding territories which was set up by Russia and Turkey in September under a deal which put off a full-blown assault against the region and its 3 million residents. Shells from Syrian government territory also hit a Turkish military observation post, one of 12 set up near the Idlib borders by Ankara, which backs the rebels.

At the border, many of the displaced were angry at the lack of Turkish action in response to the recent offensive, and called on Turkey to open its border to allow people to escape.

"We didn't ask to go into Turkey before," said 32-year-old Khsara Ahmed al-Hussein. "But when you set up a de-escalation zone and ... you guarantee that I won't get struck, but then even the Turkish observation point is struck by the regime, then what's the point of protection if you can't even protect yourself?"

When bombardment of Hussein's village intensified, his family dug holes in the earth outside their house and slept in them. When the situation became unbearable, they headed to the border, where he has been living under trees for two weeks. —AFP



IDLIB, Syria: A Syrian fighter from the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) fires a heavy artillery gun from this rebel-held province against regime positions in the northern part of Hama province yesterday. — AFP