

International

Duterte tightens grip on power in Philippine polls

Electoral tsunami also a win for president's family

MANILA: Allies of President Rodrigo Duterte stormed to a landslide victory in midterm polls, final results showed yesterday, dissolving a last check on his controversial rule. Loyalists won both houses of the legislature, shutting out all opposition candidates in the Senate, which had served as a buffer against Duterte's most contentious plans. The results open a path for Duterte - who has remarkably high approval ratings - to make good on his call to bring back the death penalty and advance his project to re-write the constitution.

"It's a clear signal that the people will be behind him as he pushes bills and processes that went nowhere previously," political analyst Ramon Casiple told AFP. With nine Duterte backers and three nominally unaligned politicians taking the 12 seats at stake in the 24-member Senate, only four opposition members will remain, results from the elections authority showed. Duterte allies kept control of the lower House of Representatives, which has approved legislation to bring back capital punishment and re-write the constitution since Duterte's 2016 election.

Among the new senators is former national police chief Ronald dela Rosa, the first enforcer of Duterte's narcotics crackdown that has killed over 5,300. Campaigners say the true toll is at least triple that and may amount to crimes against humanity. "Number one on my agenda is the reimposition of the death penalty for drug trafficking," dela Rosa told reporters. "I will focus on that." Senate seats also went to Christopher "Bong" Go, Duterte's long-time advisor, and Imee Marcos, the daughter of deceased dictator Ferdinand

Marcos, who was ousted in a 1986 popular uprising.

Duterte family wins

The top vote-getter in the Senate race, Cynthia Villar, thanked the president for his backing and asked for a round of applause for him in a speech after the results were announced. "The laws we craft or legislate must consider all interests involved," she added. "A strong and independent Senate has always been our goal." Opponents fear the majority will allow Duterte to push forward his legislative agenda, which includes re-writing the constitution.

In addition to opening avenues for him to stay in power beyond his legally mandated single term that ends in 2022, a charter change could reshape the Philippines for decades. Duterte has pitched constitutional reform to turn the Asian country into a decentralized federal republic where regions would have the power to fix local problems. But the various initiatives launched in his first three years in office have also included proposals dropping term limits, allowing him to run for another term and weakening checks on presidential power.

"The pessimistic assessment is that what we're looking towards is the complete transformation of the Philippine political system in the years to come, well beyond 2022 when Duterte's term is supposed to end," political analyst Richard Heydarian said. The landslide victory was a crushing defeat for the opposition, leaving it mostly in disarray. "Voters were unable to relate to the issues highlighted by the opposition in the elec-



MANILA: Philippines' senators-elect and allies of President Rodrigo Duterte show the Duterte fist during the proclamation ceremony by the Commission on Elections yesterday. —AFP

tion, which was all about defeating Duterte," Casiple said.

The pro-Duterte electoral tsunami was also a win for the Duterte family. Daughter Sara, touted as a possible

2022 presidential candidate, retained her post as mayor of the southern city of Davao, with sibling Sebastian winning as vice-mayor. The eldest son, Paolo, won a seat in the House of Representatives. —AFP

News in brief

Sri Lanka extends emergency

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's president extended yesterday by a further month the state of emergency imposed immediately after the Easter Sunday bombings that killed 258 people. Maithripala Sirisena issued a proclamation saying that the emergency, which gives sweeping powers to security forces to arrest and detain suspects for long periods of time, would continue for another 30 days, citing "public security". Three weeks after the suicide bombings, anti-Muslim riots broke out in a province north of the capital in a backlash against the attacks. At least one Muslim man was killed and hundreds of Muslim-owned shops and homes were destroyed. Several mosques were also vandalized. The police and the military say they have arrested scores of suspects, both in connection with the bombings and over what appeared to be organized violence against the Muslim minority. —AFP

N Korea media slams Biden

SEOUL: North Korean state media yesterday slammed former US vice president Joe Biden as an "imbecile" and a "fool of low IQ" after he criticized leader Kim Jong Un. Biden has been on the campaign trail since announcing last month his candidacy for the Democratic Party nomination in the 2020 presidential election. And some of his comments about the North Korean leadership during campaigning appear to have angered Pyongyang, sparking the colorful commentary by its official news agency KCNA. It accused Biden of "slandering the supreme leadership" of North Korea - a term usually referring to leader Kim - and said the former senator had become "reckless and senseless, seized by ambition for power." "What he uttered is just sophism of an imbecile bereft of elementary quality as a human being, let alone a politician." —AFP

Fake news rampant in Lanka despite social media ban

COLOMBO: Sri Lankan social networks saw a surge in fake news after the Easter suicide bombings a month ago despite an official social media blackout, highlighting the inability of governments to contain disinformation, experts said. A nine-day ban on platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp was introduced following the Islamic State-claimed attacks on churches and hotels on April 21 which killed 258 people and wounded nearly 500.

Many anxious social media users switched to virtual private networks (VPNs) or the TOR network to bypass the order and keep communication open with friends and relatives as the extent of the carnage became clear. But for others, the tools were a means to spread confusion and vitriol as the island struggled to come to terms with one of the worst terror attacks in its history. Sanjana Hattotuwa, who monitors social media for fake news at the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Colombo, said the government blackout had failed to prevent "engagement, production, sharing and discussion of Facebook content", and that he had seen a significant increase in false reports.

AFP has published half a dozen fact-checks debunking false claims made on Facebook and Twitter after the Easter attacks. Some had dug out photos of coffins and funerals from Sri Lanka's brutal decades-long civil war and claimed they showed victims of the blasts. One video posted to Facebook showed police arresting a man dressed in a burqa and claimed he was involved in the bombings. The video was actually from 2018, and showed a man who had used a burqa to hide his identity while he sought to attack someone over a debt issue.

Another used a five-year-old photo from India that showed a group of men wearing T-shirts with "ISIS", another name for Islamic State, written on them to claim there was an active IS cell in eastern Sri Lanka. One Twitter user claiming to be a high-ranking Sri Lankan army brigadier used the platform to accuse neighboring India of being involved in the attacks. The account was later taken down by Twitter after the Sri Lankan army complained.

Authorities in Sri Lanka - where ethnic divisions still linger after decades of war - previously blocked Facebook in March 2018 after Buddhist hardliners used incendiary posts to fan religious violence that left three people dead and reduced several hundred homes and shops to ashes. —AFP

Risk of nuclear war 'highest' since WW2

GENEVA: The risk of nuclear weapons being used is at its highest since World War Two, a senior UN security expert said on Tuesday, calling it an "urgent" issue that the world should take more seriously. Renata Dwan, director of the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), said all states with nuclear

weapons have nuclear modernization programs underway and the arms control landscape is changing, partly due to strategic competition between China and the United States.

Traditional arms control arrangements are also being eroded by the emergence of new types of war, with increasing prevalence of armed groups and private sector forces and new technologies that blurred the line between offence and defense, she told reporters in Geneva.

With disarmament talks stalemated for the past two decades, 122 countries have signed a treaty to ban nuclear weapons, partly out of frustration and partly out of

a recognition of the risks, she said. "I think that it's genuinely a call to recognize - and this has been somewhat missing in the media coverage of the issues - that the risks of nuclear war are particularly high now, and the risks of the use of nuclear weapons, for some of the factors I pointed out, are higher now than at any time since World War Two."

The nuclear ban treaty, officially called the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, was backed by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017. The treaty has so far gathered 23 of the 50 ratifications that it needs to come into force,

including South Africa, Austria, Thailand, Vietnam and Mexico. It is strongly opposed by the United States, Russia, and other states with nuclear arms.

Cuba also ratified the treaty in 2018, 56 years after the Cuban missile crisis, a 13-day Cold War face-off between Moscow and Washington that marked the closest the world had ever come to nuclear war. Dwan said the world should not ignore the danger of nuclear weapons. "How we think about that, and how we act on that risk and the management of that risk, seems to me a pretty significant and urgent question that isn't reflected fully in the (U.N.) Security Council," she said. —Reuters

Grandma Ca: The 99-yr-old standing up to coal rush

VIETNAM: Toothless and nearly blind, grandmother Pham Thi Ca refuses to leave her plot of land even after bulldozers demolished her house - an extraordinary holdout against communist Vietnam's deepening addiction to coal. The 99-year-old was offered money to move as authorities hoovered up land for a planned \$2.6 billion Japanese-funded coal plant in the remote Van Phong Bay she has called home since birth. But when she said no, around 100 authorities showed up, forcibly removed her from the house and bulldozed it as she and her grandson looked on.

They were helpless to prevent the destruction of the property two years ago, but Ca, frail and wizened, has rebuffed all attempts to evict her from the land since. "The authorities carried me away, but I refuse to move," explains Ca, who now lives in a makeshift shelter of corrugated tin, wooden beams and coconut fronds next to the pile of rubble that was once her home. "My house is here, my land is here, so I will be buried here," she tells AFP, sitting on a small cot where she spends much of her time.

It's a story playing out across Vietnam, where a strong-fisted government is powering ahead with coal projects to meet the soaring energy demands of a turbo-charged economy. Coal accounts for about a third of Vietnam's current energy production and is slated to rise to about 50 percent by 2030. That means building more coal plants in places like Van Phong Bay despite a chorus of opposition from locals who complain of land grabs, loss of livelihood and environmental damage.

'I can't do anything'

Some 300 people have already been relocated from Ca's community in south-central Khanh Hoa province. They were offered cash compensation and rooms in state housing - but the residences were far from their farms and fishing grounds. The \$43,000 inducement to leave their 9,000 square-meter plot was not enough to upend Ca's family. "We cannot work there, there is no land for cultivation," says Ca's son Ho Huu Hanh, referring to the proposed relocation area.

He insists that they were never told about the planned coal plant and accuses authorities of bending the law to strongarm residents to leave. The family lost their farmland anyway. Now Hanh works as a day-laborer or catches snails and small fish to get by, earning about \$170 a month. "I can't do anything, I feel so sorry for myself," he adds, crying.

Others in the area are worried about what the coal plant will do to fish and coral reefs in the bay where water temperatures could rise due to the plant's runoff. Like many of the 20 or so coal plants already operating in Vietnam, the bulk of the funding for the yet-to-be-built Van Phong plant is external. The Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) last month approved a \$1.2 billion loan for the project, which is sponsored by the Sumitomo Corporation of Japan and is set to come online in 2023.

Sumitomo says assessments were conducted to measure the environmental, social and health impacts



VAN PHONG BAY, Vietnam: This photograph taken on April 21, 2019 shows 99-year-old Pham Thi Ca resting in a hammock in her makeshift shelter. —AFP

of the project which were "managed and mitigated appropriately". It says consultation meetings were held with residents and that compensation and resettlement was "carried out under the responsibility of local authorities in accordance with the laws of Vietnam". Vietnamese officials did not reply to AFP's request for comment.

Covered in ash

Developing economies like Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia are particularly attractive for investors from Japan, South Korea and China as the developed world turns away from coal in search of clean energy. Foreign investment has skewed Vietnam's energy strategy, locking it "into expensive and dirty power for decades," warns Julien Vincent, executive director at Market Forces, a non-governmental energy investment watchdog. But for power-hungry Vietnam coal is for now cheaper, more reliable and more familiar than renewables, which currently provide less than one percent of the country's power generation.

That number will inch upward to 2.3 percent by next year, according to Vietnam's power plan, with private investment already rushing to fund wind and solar projects. But renewables alone cannot meet Vietnam's insatiable appetite for power. "Wind and solar are environmentally friendly but very unstable... we cannot just use renewable energy to supplement our big energy needs," says Bui Van Thinh, the director of Phu Lac wind farm in Binh Thuan province.

Still, many are pushing for renewables to be favored over the 30 or so coal plants slated to come online by 2030. "After 2020 we don't need to build new coal power plants," argues Nguyen Thi Hang, the head of the clean air and water program at Vietnamese NGO GreenID. "Energy efficiency and renewable energy should be prioritized, gas can be considered as a midterm bridge." Just down the road from the coastal perch of Thinh's 24-MW wind farm sits one of Vietnam's largest coal plants, the sprawling 6,200-MW capacity Vinh Tan complex.

The enormous site in a once-sleepy fishing village has for locals come at a price. "It used to be nice, clean and pure here," recalls resident Nguyen Tai Tien. "Now there is smoke... and every morning and afternoon we have to sweep our house and the roads because of all the ash," he adds. —AFP

Never mind the war: Kabul fears surge in crime

KABUL: In central Kabul last month, two men stabbed a teenager and left him for dead before escaping on a motorcycle - a brazen attack amid a rising tide of killings and kidnappings as war-scarred residents complain of increasing lawlessness. The brutal mugging happened near the green zone, home to many of the Afghan capital's foreign diplomats, but numerous armed guards posted along the street did not try to help the victim, thanks to arcane local liability laws and restrictions. The attackers fled after snatching the boy's mobile phone and camera. He survived, but it took about an hour for authorities to arrive and take him to hospital.

Officials and stressed-out residents say crime is surging in Kabul, where police are already pushed to their limits attempting to prevent insurgent attacks by the Taliban and other groups including Islamic State. Jan Aqa Naweed, spokesman for Afghanistan's chamber of commerce, said crime has grown so bad that business people and entrepreneurs were fleeing the country for fear they could be targeted. "The increase in the crime rate, the killing and kidnapping of businessmen - this has forced many traders to leave the country," he told AFP. "Some of them take their families and money to countries such as Turkey and Uzbekistan. The crime in the city has negatively affected investment."

Authorities have started to take note. On Saturday, the interior ministry sacked Mohammad Salim Almas, the head of Kabul's criminal investigation department, because of what officials called a "dramatic increase" in crime. The rise is hard to quantify. The interior ministry this month said it had recorded 100,000 crimes over a five-year period, but did not provide a breakdown.

Abdul Khaliq Zazai Watandost, a member of Kabul's provincial council who helps monitor crime rates, told AFP that criminals have killed 70 people in the capital and its surrounding areas in the past two months, with dozens more locals kidnapped. "Crime has become a bigger problem than terrorism for Kabul residents," Watandost said. "Terrorism is a big phenomenon - but at least we should be able to control the crime."

Aside from murder and kidnappings, car thefts are common, the narcotics trade is booming and criminal gangs sometimes target foes by slapping "sticky bombs" under their cars. Shamsuddin, a shopkeeper who only wanted to give his first name, said when he goes into central Kabul to buy groceries, he splits his cash in two. "I give some to my son and keep some with myself," he told AFP. "This is because if criminals find out you have a good amount of money on you, they will kill you and take your money." Residents are changing their routes to work, while carrying guns and keeping weapons at home are also common.

Taxi drivers are wary of driving after dark for fear of being attacked by a passenger or having their car stolen. "I don't care about myself, but I am scared of losing the car because I am working for someone else and it is not my car," taxi driver Mohammad Omar told AFP. "Nowadays every Afghan is so worried." Deputy interior minister General Khoshal Sadat acknowledged the psychological toll crime is taking. "It is threatening the physical and mental security of people in the city," Sadat said, Kabul's crime came to the fore again this month when former journalist Mena Mangal was murdered in broad daylight on a busy street. —AFP