

International

Liberal and Green gains upset EU parliament power balance

Mainstream groups still control lion's share of 751-seat assembly

BRUSSELS: Liberals and Greens say they have broken the two centrist blocs' grip on power in the European Parliament based on a projected shift in the electoral fortunes of the four. Liberals and Greens are now pushing harder to snag the head of the European Commission, the 28-nation EU executive, and shape key laws, such as on climate change and taxation. The centre-right EPP (European People's Party) still has the most seats, followed by the centre-left Socialists, but the pair no longer control a majority, according to partial and projected results.

"The monopoly of power is broken," said Margrethe Vestager, whose Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) wants her to head the new commission. ALDE is projected to have around 100 seats, making it third in the assembly behind some 180 seats for the EPP and 152 for the Socialists and Democrats. But ALDE and the Greens also hope to work with the EPP and the Socialists to check big gains by Eurosceptics, populist and right-wing parties who could have around 150 seats.

Though power is set to be fragmented, the mainstream, pro-European Union groups still control the lion's share of the 751-seat assembly. Vestager alluded to her own credentials for the top job on the Commission, where she served as the anti-trust commissioner and gained a reputation for toughness. She said EU voters have broken the EPP and Socialist monopoly the way she stopped US hi-tech firms and other multinationals from undermining market competition.

Vestager hailed signals from both the Socialists and the Greens to forge a new kind of coalition "of those who want to take actions progressively to change things". The Danish politician said that meant a "different composition of leadership" of the main institutions, long dominated by the EPP and

the Socialists. Manfred Weber, leader of the EPP in parliament, is aiming to succeed fellow group member Jean-Claude Juncker as head of the European Commission. Debate over the position begins in the next few days.

'Shrinking centre'

The commission is powerful because it plays a key role drafting laws and rules on the economy, the environment, counter-terrorism, personal data protection, and telecommunications. Other top positions to be decided following the elections are the head of the European Central Bank and the foreign policy chief. Vestager also stressed the need for gender balance in the top jobs. Weber, a German, was subdued when he spoke to journalists in the European Parliament, backed by giant screens where the results were being projected.

"I don't feel a real powerful victory today," Weber said after the EPP saw its projected number of seats decrease by around 36 from 216 in the outgoing assembly. "We are facing a shrinking centre," he added, alluding to both his party's results and those of the Socialists which held 185 seats in the outgoing parliament. Esther de Lange, a Dutch EPP member, said her group could still take the lead in negotiations because it remained the biggest group. But the projected results mark the end of decades of domination by two parties and could lead to more wrangling over jobs and legislation. Ska Keller, a Greens candidate for the top commission job, told journalists her party's surge to a projected 70 seats from 51 would usher in a new dynamic. When asked whether the results could allow the Greens to play kingmaker, Keller replied it could be kingmaker or "queenmaker" given her party's stand on gender equality. Her party said it "aimed to deliver on green action, social Europe and democracy."



BRUSSELS: People holds letters forming the words "Europe Resists" during an action of activist group Avaaz outside the European Parliament after the announcement of results for European parliamentary elections on Sunday. — AFP

ALDE leader Guy Verhofstadt proclaimed his party the real pro-European winner of the elections, with it holding the key to success for the next parliament. "That means no solid pro-European majority is possible without the participation of our new centrist group," the former Belgian premier added. The group will be composed of

ALDE, French President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance Movement and other "reform-driven, like-minded parties," Verhofstadt said. "We will find a majority for the fight against climate change, fairer taxation, completion of the internal market and European solutions for the migration crisis," he added. — AFP

Gathering storm: Merkel govt feels heat of climate vote

BERLIN: A European election drubbing has served as a harsh wake-up call for Germany's leaders that young voters fear climate change and are furious about the government's glacial response to it. A surge of support, helped by the Fridays for Future protest movement, propelled Germany's Greens to second place in Sunday's European Parliament elections, at the expense of the mainstream parties. Chancellor Angela Merkel's centre-right CDU/CSU bloc and their ailing junior coalition partners the Social Democrats (SPD) both suffered historic losses after being caught flat-footed on environmental policy.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which denies man-made climate change and defends coal mines and diesel cars, pointed to the Greens - who won 20 percent, double the AfD's score - as their new "main competitors". For Merkel's government, the resounding ballot-box slap piles on the pressure to quickly phase out dirty coal, boost renewables and put clean cars on the road, among other issues her cabinet is due to discuss tomorrow.

"The young generation is demanding a new inter-generational contract from the EU and the German government to protect them from the climate crisis," said Christoph Bals, head of activist group Germanwatch. The World Wide Fund for Nature charged that Merkel's "grand coalition has failed to find answers for the greatest crises of our time ... global warming and mass species extinction. The voters have clearly rejected this ignorance."

Missed targets

The trained scientist Merkel - once dubbed the "climate chancellor" - is now seen by many as having dropped the ball on Germany's ambitious energy transition as the top EU economy is on course to miss its own carbon reduction targets. Long a green energy pioneer committed to phasing out nuclear power by 2022, Germany is now meeting one third of its electricity needs with clean renewables such as wind, solar and biogas. However, it is also still generating another third with coal, a climate killer with huge CO2 emissions, and has made little headway in reducing emissions from its transport and agriculture sectors.

Merkel's government has also been widely criticized for coddling the powerful auto sector, a relative late-comer to electric vehicles. Similarly, both the CDU and SPD have been seen to drag their feet on shuttering Germany's coal mines, with the deadline currently set for 2038, as they worry about the electoral backlash from job losses. But while the big parties have cast a fearful eye on the AfD, they have now been blindsided by the greater electoral muscle of young people who fear inheriting an over-heating planet.

YouTube revolt

A generation of young people has grown up with dire predictions of melting ice caps, rising seas, more extreme weather events and resulting refugee flows and unrest. Many no longer believe that the politicians currently in power are truly committed to averting the climate crisis that may fully strike only after they leave office, or after they die. Last Friday, more than 320,000 children and youths rallied in Germany in the latest global wave of the demonstrations initiated by 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. "You're running out of excuses, we're running out of time," read one protest banner.

Days earlier a 26-year-old blue-haired YouTube star called Rezo had become an overnight household name with a blistering hour-long attack on the coalition parties, much of it centered on climate change. CDU efforts to dismiss the video as a youthful rant appeared befuddled and patronizing, as the viral clip was viewed more than 12 million times and Rezo received the backing of more than 70 other YouTube stars. —AFP

Far-right League victory in EU vote strains Italy coalition

ROME: The triumph of Matteo Salvini and his anti-migrant League party at the European elections raised questions in Italy yesterday over the populist government's future. The League won over 34 percent, compared to just six percent in the 2014 EU elections and 17 percent in the Italian general election last year. The results confirm the reversal of fortunes of the League and its coalition partner, the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S), which pocketed 32.5 percent at the general election but took home just 17 percent on Sunday.

"We can expect a week of frenetic negotiations to see how everyone will reposition themselves," said Giovanni Orsina, politics professor at Rome's LUISS University. The League victory and M5S collapse in popularity "is explosive in terms of the consequences for government stability," political analyst Stefano Folli wrote in the Repubblica daily. "We're not talking tomorrow, or the day after, but the fuse which will lead to the government's collapse has been lit," he said.

The League snapped up votes from both the M5S and the opposition thanks to a hardline stance on migration and a savvy multimedia team bombarding Italians with selfies of Salvini. The party did particularly well in centres seen as migrants "hot spots", including a town held up as a model of integration.

Salvini - who celebrated by tweeting a photo of himself grinning and holding a sign saying "top party in Italy" - is now likely to try to force the M5S's hand on every plan it has contested since the coalition formed in June 2018. "I ask for an acceleration on the government program," the 46-year-old said, brandishing Roman Catholic rosary beads. The main questions at stake are a high-speed rail line between the cities of Turin and Lyon in France, and a flat tax proposal.

M5S head Luigi Di Maio suggested the League had got one over on it because of political attacks which initially went unchallenged. "Perhaps we were too silent, too pure at



MILAN: Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini gives a "thumbs up" during a press conference at the Lega headquarters yesterday. — AFP

the beginning, and if that was our mistake I take responsibility," he said yesterday. The results place Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in an increasingly difficult position. The leader agreed upon by Salvini and Di Maio is purportedly independent but was a M5S pick.

Analysts say Salvini may be tempted to break up the coalition and join forces with others on the right. "I'd say the possibility of autumn elections is over 50 percent, unless there's a very strong alignment of the M5S with the Salvini leadership, which would create enormous tensions within the Movement," Orsina said. Italy's small far-right Brothers of Italy (FdiI) party took home 6.4 percent of the vote, while billionaire Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right Forza Italia party, a historic ally of the League, pocketed 8.8 percent.

"Salvini may pull the plug if he feels confident enough in getting an outright majority by siding with Brothers of Italy and part of Forza Italia (without Berlusconi)," said Lorenzo Codogno, former chief economist at the Italian Treasury Department. The centre-left Democratic Party (PD), which won just 18 percent at the general election, took home 22.7 percent of the vote, clawing back some votes from M5S.

The Green party, which recorded significant gains in many other European countries, took just 2.29 percent. Salvini's victory had been widely expected, despite the M5S taking advantage of embarrassing corruption scandals involving the far-right party. —AFP



SOUTHAMPTON: Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage reacts after the European Parliament election results for the UK South East Region are announced at the Civic Centre Southampton early yesterday. — AFP

figures said it was time for their party to decisively back a public vote.

'Big, simple message'

Farage only registered the Brexit party in February but built on his support as a leading campaigner in the 2016 referendum, when he led the now largely defunct UK Independence Party (UKIP). He said his party won with "a big, simple message, which is: we've been badly let down by two parties who have broken their promises." He said his party should now have a say in any new Brexit negotiations with Brussels. The EU has said it will not re-open the withdrawal deal already agreed with May, but many of her would-be successors are still likely to try.

Farage also warned that failure to leave the EU on Oct 31 would see his party replicate its victory in a general election. "History has been made. This is just the beginning," he declared. However, analysts warned that European election results cannot be easily translated into success at British parliamentary elections, not least because a different voting system is used. Anti-Brexit campaigners also hailed the success of parties who want to keep Britain in the EU, suggesting voters are as split as they were when they voted 52 to 48 percent to leave in 2016. —AFP

Beaten Macron seeks to shake up EU parliament

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron tasted defeat in European elections, but not disaster, and is set to continue pushing both his pro-EU agenda and a realignment of parties in the EU parliament. Macron's Republic on the Move (LREM) party finished second behind the far-right National Rally of his arch-rival Marine Le Pen, but the two parties ended with less than 1.0 percentage point separating them - on 22.41 percent and 23.31 percent respectively. The vote was seen as a test for Macron domestically after months of anti-government protests, while his credibility in Europe as a champion of deeper integration was also judged to be on the line.

"A disappointment, but not a defeat for the Elysee," headlined Le Parisien newspaper yesterday, while an editorial in the Les Echos business daily said Macron's party was "resisting well" two years after his election. The 41-year-old's priority will now be trying to increase his influence in the European parliament where LREM and its centrist allies will send 23 MEPs, the same number as Le Pen's RN. His long-standing objective is to redraw the political map of the European parliament, long dominated by the centre-right EPP grouping and the centre-left S&D - in the same way as he broke the stranglehold of France's traditional parties.

Macron's EU-level partners, who form the ALDE group, finished third in Sunday night's vote, but the French leader is now aiming to broaden the coalition to include new partners, particularly Greens who made major gains. "The group that we are going to join is going to be a swing group which will try to be a driver in the creation of a progressive alliance. —AFP

'Green wave' in EU vote amid climate crisis

BERLIN: With double-digit scores across Europe's biggest countries including a stunning 20 percent in Germany, the Greens bagged record gains in EU elections on Sunday with younger voters leading calls for action to halt global warming. The environmental party doubled its score in Germany from the last EU elections in 2014, knocking the Social Democrats off their traditional second place. In France, the Greens were number three with 12 percent, while in Austria, Ireland and the Netherlands, they garnered double-digits.

In Britain, they were on 12.4 percent, nearly double their previous score, and beating the ruling Conservatives into fifth place. "To see The Green Party beating the Conservatives so far in these elections is truly amazing. Something seismic is happening in British and European politics," said Alexandra Phillips, Green Party candidate for South East England. With the two main traditional EU blocs - the conservative EPP and the centre-left Social Democrats projected to lose ground, the Greens could end up as kingmakers in the European Parliament.

"This is a Sunday for Future," said the Greens' lead candidate in Germany Sven Giegold, in a nod to the "Fridays for Future" school strikes by students sounding the alarm on the climate crisis. His counterpart in France, Yannick Jadot, also hailed it as a "green wave in which we are the main players". France's Prime Minister Edouard Philippe acknowledged the "message about the ecological emergency". "Everywhere in Europe, our citizens and in particular the youngest are asking us to act with determination and that's what we'll do in France and in Europe," he said.

In Ireland, Green Party candidate Ciaran Cuffe was on course to top the first preference tally in Dublin on 23 percent of the vote, with the Greens also seen in contention in the country's two other constituencies. —AFP