

International

Ex-leftist prime minister wins Croatia presidential election

Kitarovic manages to garner 47.3% vote

ZAGREB: Leftist former prime minister Zoran Milanovic, who has pledged to make Croatia a tolerant country turning the page on its wartime past, won Sunday's presidential run-off vote, defeating the incumbent conservative leader. Milanovic took 52.7 percent of the vote while President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, who had tried to unite a fractured right-wing, garnered 47.3 percent, according to results based on vote count at nearly all polling stations released by the electoral commission.

The second-round election was held just days after Croatia took over the European Union's helm for a six-month period, which will be dominated by Brexit and the bloc's enlargement.

At the same time, the EU's newest member is struggling with a mass exodus of its people, corruption and a lackluster economy at home. Grabar-Kitarovic campaigned on a slogan promoting "real Croatia", hinting she believes the ruling conservative HDZ party that backed her was the only one who can truly represent the country.

Milanovic, a Social Democratic, called such statements "very dangerous", and advocated for a "normal Croatia" as a liberal democracy which promotes equality for all citizens.

"Four million of us ... are looking for our place in Europe which is, despite all the problems, the nicest place to live, the most peaceful project in which Croatia must find its place and interest," Milanovic told supporters in Zagreb after his victory.

'United in differences'

"Let's be united in (our) differences," the 53-year-old said. In the campaign Milanovic stressed that the "wars are over", referring to Croatia's 1990s independ-

ence war that remains an emotive issue.

Grabar-Kitarovic, 51, the country's first female president, had tried but failed to lure back hardliners who had voted for a nationalist folk singer in the presidential election's first round in December.

She stressed unity, patriotism and references to the 1990s war in her re-election bid. Conceding defeat on Sunday evening Grabar-Kitarovic promised a "civilized transfer" of power to Milanovic.

She stressed that "Croatia needs stability" and unity as "we are the strongest when we are together." Analysts say that Milanovic, who dominated in the cities, also won thanks in part to the split among the right-wingers. The election was viewed as a key test for the ruling HDZ party of moderate Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic ahead of parliamentary elections later this year and Grabar-Kitarovic's loss was seen as a heavy blow. "It will weaken the (HDZ) party" and harms Plenkovic's reputation, political analyst Tihomir Cipek said. The prime minister is also facing the discontent of hardliners within the HDZ over his moderate policies.

Youngsters are leaving

Grabar-Kitarovic presented herself as the "woman of the people" with humble farming roots, and is well known for stunts such as singing in public which her critics deride as embarrassing.

She also came under fire for downplaying the crimes committed by Croatia's World War II pro-Nazi regime. Meanwhile, Milanovic, premier from 2011 until 2016 whose government failed to push through much-needed reforms, sought to make a political comeback and throw off a reputation as arrogant and elitist. He will now take office during Croatia's EU presidency where four main issues are likely to dominate—the bloc's rela-



ZAGREB: Presidential candidate of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia Zoran Milanovic (right) waves flanked by his wife Sanja Music Milanovic on Sunday in Zagreb, as they celebrate winning following initial results in Croatia's presidential election. — AFP

tionship with the UK after Brexit; the membership bids of Western Balkan states; climate change; and the bloc's budget framework for the next decade.

The Adriatic country joined the EU in 2013, but its economy, strongly relying on tourism, remains one of the bloc's weakest.

The EU's open borders also accelerated the exodus

of its people to seek better pay in wealthier member states. Many emigrants also cite corruption, nepotism and poor public services as reasons for leaving. "Politicians are wrangling about the past and insignificant issues while my generation is leaving," said Maja Maric, a 20-year-old economy student. She said she voted for a "lesser evil". —AFP

For Democrats, little recourse over Trump Iran actions

WASHINGTON: US lawmakers have few options for tamping down any escalation by President Donald Trump of tensions with Iran, despite Democrats' outrage over his failure to inform Congress in advance about a strike against a top Iranian military commander.

Members of Congress began to return from their year-end holiday recess yesterday, and Democrats said they will attempt quickly to pass legislation to bar him - or any future US commander-in-chief - from conducting a campaign against Iran without obtaining Congress' approval.

Late on Sunday, House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the Democratic-led chamber would introduce and vote this week on a War Powers Resolution that would force Trump to stop military action against Iran within 30 days. But with Trump's fellow Republicans in control of the Senate and showing little inclination to break from their party's leader, there is scant expectation any legislation could win enough support to become law.

Longtime foes Tehran and Washington have been in a war of words since Friday, when Qassem Soleimani was killed in a US drone strike at Baghdad airport. The attack stoked concerns about all-out war if Tehran retaliates. On Sunday, Trump doubled down on his threats to target Iran for any retaliatory attacks and Iran said it was stepping back from commitments to a 2015 nuclear deal with six major powers.

Trump broke precedent by failing to inform congressional leaders before the attack on Soleimani, and by making classified his formal notification to Congress of the attack on Saturday. Under the US War Powers Act, the president must inform Congress within 48 hours of introducing military forces into armed conflict abroad. Those notifications normally detail the justification for the intervention.

The act also bars a president from committing US armed forces from any foreign action lasting more than 60 days without Congress' approval. By making the War Powers notification classified, Trump limited lawmakers' ability to talk about it, and sidestepped the law's goal of keeping Americans informed about military action, some legal experts said.

"It may be in formal compliance with the war powers resolution, but it is inconsistent with the general goal of providing transparency and information to the American people," said Oona Hathaway, a professor at Yale University's law school. Trump took to Twitter on Sunday to say his posts would serve as notification to Congress that the country "will quickly & fully strike back" if Iran strikes any US person or target, and that he had no legal requirement to inform Congress.

Legal experts disagreed, saying the war powers law required a formal report to Congress, and did not allow such a blanket clearance ahead of time, especially not via social media.

The War Powers Act was passed in 1973, largely in response to President Richard Nixon's secret bombing of Cambodia. Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer and Senator Bob Menendez, ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, urged Trump to declassify the notification. "An entirely classified notification is simply not appropriate in a democratic society, and there appears to be no legitimate justification for classifying this notification," they wrote in a letter to Trump. Congress' main power over the president is its control of federal spending, and the Democratic-controlled House could pass legislation that would bar Trump from spending any taxpayer dollars on a conflict with Iran. — Reuters

Uganda police arrest pop-star MP Bobi Wine, teargas supporters

KAMPALA: Ugandan police yesterday arrested singer-turned-politician Bobi Wine and sprayed teargas to disperse his supporters as he sought to kick off public meetings ahead of presidential elections next year. Wine, a popular figure among young Ugandans, announced last year he would challenge President Yoweri Museveni in the 2021 elections, and yesterday was scheduled to begin a week-long series of consultations ahead of the vote.

But the first event at a Catholic Church in his constituency in Kampala could not proceed as police deployed before dawn to the site, prompting protests by his supporters, an AFP reporter saw.

Protesters set alight car tires and blocked roads, while police backed by firefighters, armored cars and water cannon used teargas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowd.

Police spokesman Fred Enanga confirmed that Wine and members of his entourage had been arrested. "We are temporarily holding them in our police station in Kasangati. We shall have to release them at some later stage but we are looking at charges of holding an unlawful assembly and disobedience of lawful orders," Enanga said. Wine, whose real name is Robert Kyagulanyi, has already been detained a number of times. He has had numerous attempts to hold concerts



KAMPALA: Bobi Wine walks handcuffed together with another prisoner before boarding the prison bus leading him to Luzira maximum prison in Kampala yesterday. — AFP

blocked since he was elected as an MP in 2017.

Enanga said Wine planned to exceed what is allowed under Uganda's election laws by "going early and conducting campaigns" as opposed to holding "consultations." Under Uganda's 2000 election law presidential "aspirants" may carry out "nationwide consultation" in the 12 months ahead of their official nomination as candidates. The law requires aspirants to "introduce" themselves to the Electoral Commission (EC) and notify local authorities of events planned in their area.

On December 3 Wine sent a letter to the EC officially introducing himself and outlining his plans,

which he published on social media. In the past, the police have warned opposition politicians that all events must also comply with the Public Order Management Act 2013.

Human Rights Watch has criticized that law as granting the police "wide discretionary powers over the content and management of public meetings."

Wine has built a sizeable following among Uganda's booming urban youth population, many of whom say they are tired of Museveni's long rule. Museveni seized power at the head of a rebel army in 1986 and many observers say they doubt he will ever give up power through democratic elections. — AFP

'Pirates' kill 4 Nigerian navy personnel, kidnap 3

WARRI, Nigeria: Suspected pirates killed four Nigerian navy operatives and abducted three foreign sailors in an attack on a dredging ship last week, security sources said yesterday.

Armed assailants raided the oil dredger MV Ambika as it worked in the volatile waterways of the Niger Delta late on Thursday, an intelligence officer told AFP. "During the incident, a team of naval rescue squad was sent for rescue, however, the hoodlums succeeded in killing four of the naval personnel of the squad during a gun battle," the source said. "Before the arrival of the naval rescue team, the hoodlums had gained access into the vessel and abducted two Russians and one Indian who were part of the eight crew members on board the vessel."

A naval officer stationed nearby confirmed the inci-

dent and said the coffins of the slain sailors had been brought ashore. The waters around Nigeria are among the most dangerous in the world for piracy. In the first nine months of last year the Gulf of Guinea accounted for 82 percent of crew kidnappings around the world, according to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), an organisation monitoring crimes at sea.

Much of the problem originates in the Niger Delta where the region's vast oil wealth has failed to trickle down to local populations and widespread poverty has stirred unrest.

Pirates emerge from the creeks and swamps in high-powered speedboats to raid passing ships, kidnap crews and spirit them back to Nigeria's shores. Maritime security analysts Dryad Global said reports indicated the attack happened three nautical miles (3.5 miles, 5.5 kilometers) from the mouth of the Ramos river. "Incidents within this general area occur with relative regularity however are commonly found within the creeks and rivers," it said.

"The majority of legacy incidents in this area were focused upon the opportune kidnap of locals and personnel involved in the protection and manning of oil and gas infrastructure." — AFP



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Armenian held for 'false information' over Iran general

YEREVAN: An Armenian man has been arrested for releasing "false information" on Facebook claiming the country's prime minister had congratulated Donald Trump for killing Iran's top general, the security service said yesterday. "On January 2, the Facebook page 'Diana Arutyunyan' published information according to which Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan congratulated the United States for its actions against a senior Iranian military official," Armenia's SNB security service said in a statement.

This "false information" was picked up by Azerbaijani and Iranian media, causing "major damage to the national security interests of Armenia", it said. Pashinyan, who came to power after a 2018 revolution, himself denied on his Facebook page on Sunday that he had congratulated Trump. He also urged the United States and Iran to exercise restraint while the foreign minister called his Iranian counterpart to express condolences over the assassination.

General Qasem Soleimani, Iran's top military commander, died in a US drone attack at Baghdad airport on Friday, raising tensions in the Middle East. "Diana Arutyunyan" is the pseudonym for a man whose identity has not been revealed.

In a video released with the SNB statement, the man explained that he had created the Facebook page in 2018 to "write political publications" and admitted being the author of the article in question. "I did it because I have political opinions and I believe that it is unjust to keep Robert Kocharyan in prison," he said in the video, referring to the former president who is being held for a "breach of constitutional order". —AFP