

International

France's Macron takes drubbing in local elections, Greens surge

Elections are mid-term test for French president

PARIS: France President Emmanuel Macron's centrist party received a drubbing on Sunday in municipal elections, as the Greens celebrated victories in several big cities after a surge in support. Macron had hoped the elections would help anchor his young party in towns and cities across France, including Paris, ahead of an anticipated 2022 re-election bid.

But aides had more recently been playing down expectations and the sweeping wins by the Greens, who in some cities joined forces with leftist allies, may compel Macron to reshuffle his government to win back disenfranchised left-wing voters. In a rare bright spot for Macron, his prime minister, Edouard Philippe, won his bid to become mayor of the northern port city of Le Havre. Although the French constitution allows Philippe to name someone to act as mayor while he remains prime minister, his win deepens questions over his job as premier.

Exit polls showed the Greens winning in Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux and Strasbourg, building on the momentum created by their strong performance in France in last year's European Parliament elections. Yannick Jadot, a European Parliament lawmaker from the Europe Ecology - The Greens, hailed an historic victory. "It's an incredible green wave," he said. In Paris, the biggest prize of all, the incumbent Socialist mayor Anne Hidalgo celebrated victory after a sham-bolic campaign by Macron's camp.

France's 35,000 mayors set policy on issues from urban planning to education and the environment. While local factors typically drive voter choices, they give the electorate an opportunity to support or punish a president mid-mandate. "We have a government that is completely disconnected from reality," said

Naouel, a voter in Paris' 9th district who said she was backing the center-right opposition candidate. In Perpignan, Marine Le Pen's far-right Rassemblement National (National Rally) claimed victory, the first time the protectionist, anti-EU party has taken control of a town with a population of more than 100,000 people.



Macron's party may fail to win a big city

Reshuffle?

In this second round of voting, turnout was low and people wore masks because of the novel coronavirus pandemic. The first round was held just days before Macron imposed one of Europe's strictest lockdowns in mid-March. Turnout was just 40.5%, interior ministry data showed. The weak performance of Macron's La Republique en Marche will prompt much soul-searching for the president, who in the run-up to the vote said he wanted to reinvent his presidency with two years left in his mandate. Early in his presidency, Macron's left-wing opponents derided him as a 'president of the rich' as he eased taxes



MONTPELLIER: Montpellier city hall candidate leading the Montpellier Unie (Montpellier United) electoral list, Michael Delafosse (left) of the Socialist Party (PS), Montpellier Unie co-lister Coralie Manton (center) of the Europe Ecologie - Les Verts (EELV) green party, and European Member of Parliament Yannick Jadot of EELV react as they sit at a cafe terrace in Montpellier. — AFP

on companies and relaxed worker protections as he enacted reforms to liberalize France's regulation-choked economy. The reforms were bearing fruit: growth was robust among euro zone peers and stubbornly high unemployment was falling.

But the past three years have been mired in social unrest and the pandemic's impact is reversing some of Macron's hard-fought gains, as disillusion amongst the leftist faction of his party grows. The Green's stunning performance on Sunday may per-

sue Macron to put more emphasis on the environment in his policies if he seeks to shore up his support on the left. "Ecology is the area where Macron is perceived as having done nothing," said Frederic Dabi, director of pollster Ifoop. "The French will want results on green issues." Macron will hold talks with his prime minister, presidency officials said. Asked about Philippe's future, a source close to Macron said: "What follows will be enshrined in continuity." — Reuters

Civilians among over 100 victims of Libya mines

TRIPOLI: Mines have killed or wounded more than 100 people, including many civilians, south of Libya's capital following deadly combat between rival forces, the UN said Sunday. "Mines and improvised explosive devices (planted) in or near homes have caused more than 100 victims," including civilians and mine disposal experts. UNSMIL, the UN mission in Libya, said in a statement.

It did not give a breakdown of killed or wounded. The toll was for casualties since early June, it said following a meeting in Rome between interim UN envoy to Libya Stephanie Williams and Government of National Accord head Fayez al-Sarraj. Earlier this month, the Tripoli-based GNA recognized by the UN regained full control of the capital and its suburbs after more than a year of fighting off an offensive by eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar. Haftar's forces have been accused by the GNA, the UN and Human Rights Watch (HRW) of laying mines in residential southern suburbs of the capital.

HRW said earlier this month that antipersonnel mines discovered in May were "of Soviet and Russian origin". At the Rome



TARHUNA: An aerial view shows Libyan experts searching for human remains during the exhumation of mass graves in Tarhuna, southeast of the capital Tripoli. — AFP

meeting, Williams also expressed concern over reports claiming that "mercenaries of various nationalities" had been deployed in Libyan oil installations. On Friday, the country's National Oil Corporation said Russian and other foreign mercenaries had entered the key Al-Sharara oil field the previous day. Al-Sharara is under the control of forces loyal to Haftar, who is backed by Russia. Williams said the presence of mercenaries there "threatens" to transform Libya's so-called oil crescent region into a "battlefield".

Plunged into chaos by the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that toppled and killed its

longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi, oil-rich Libya has two rival administrations. Haftar's forces, which are also backed by Egypt and the UAE, launched an assault in April 2019 to wrest control of the capital Tripoli from the GNA. Haftar's fighters withdrew from the southern outskirts of Tripoli and the entire west of the country earlier this month after a string of battlefield defeats to the Turkish-backed GNA. On Saturday, Sarraj also held talks in Rome with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte during which he stressed that a solution to the Libyan conflict cannot be military, the GNA said. — AFP

Israel orders evangelical's GOD TV off air

JERUSALEM: Israel's media watchdog said Sunday that it had withdrawn the broadcast license from US-based evangelical network GOD TV, accusing it of seeking to target Jews with Christian content. International Christian network's GOD TV launched its Shelanu (Hebrew for "ours") channel at the end of April on Israeli cable provider Hot, describing it as catering to Christians. But the channel provoked an immediate outcry in Israel, with then-communications minister David Amsalem accusing it of being a "missionary channel" seeking to convert Jews to Christianity. The Cable and Satellite Broadcasting Council launched an investigation to determine if GOD TV had misrepresented its content when it applied for a licence.

Council chairman Asher Bitton said on Sunday that following the probe and a hearing, he had informed Hot that Shelanu broadcasts must be removed within seven days. "The channel is aimed at Jews with Christian content, in contrast to the original broadcast request, which stated it was designated for Christians," Bitton said in a council statement. It said

that a Christian channel for Jews would not be automatically disqualified in the future, but that it would have to seek council approval, which Shelanu had not done. Hot could file a new request for Shelanu that would include "a truthful and detailed" characterisation of the channel, the statement added.

A spokeswoman for Hot said that the company was "cooperating with the council and will act in accordance with its decisions on the matter". In one promotional clip for Shelanu, GOD TV director Ward Simpson tells viewers, "we're going to preach the Jewish Jesus to the nation of Israel... they're going to hear the gospel presented to them in their native tongue". In a separate online video response to the criticism, he acknowledged that "proselytising in Israel is a very touchy subject" but went on to say that preaching about Jesus was a mission.

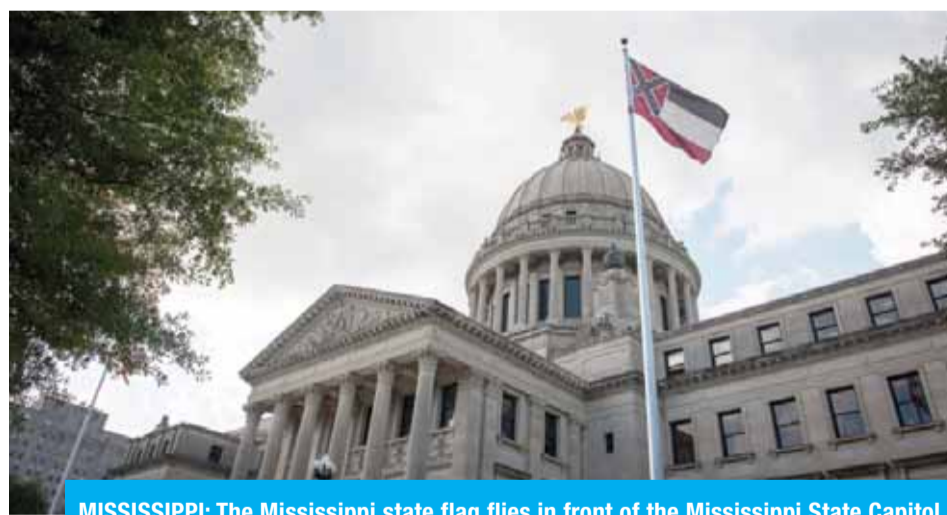
GOD TV broadcasts religious content in around 200 countries and claims to have several hundred million viewers. Israel enjoys vigorous support from evangelical movements in the United States but keeps a lid on missionary work in the Holy Land. While Israeli law only expressly forbids the giving of money or gifts to encourage conversions to another religion, missionary activities in general are closely monitored by the authorities and are offensive to many Israelis. According to Israeli government data, around two percent of the population is Christian, mainly Arabs. — AFP

Mississippi votes to remove Confederate symbol

JACKSON: Lawmakers in Mississippi voted Sunday to remove the Confederate battle standard from the state flag, after nationwide protests drew renewed attention to symbols of the United States' racist past. The measure passed with a 91-23 majority vote in the House of Representatives, triggering cheers in the Senate gallery. A few hours later, the Senate voted 37-14 for the bill. "In the name of history, whether you're black or white, rich or poor, Democrat or Republican, I ask you today to stand in the name of history," Democratic senator Derrick T. Simmons urged his colleagues before the vote.

"I ask each of you as we recognize and understand the Mississippi of yesterday, let's vote today for the Mississippi of tomorrow." Senators celebrated with cheers, hugs and fist-bumps. Mississippi is the only American state to incorporate the Confederate standard on its official flag, after nearby Georgia dropped it in 2003. The criss-crossed diagonal stars pattern was used by southern troops, including Mississippians, during the 1861-1865 American Civil War - the bloody conflict that brought an end to slavery - and for many it remains a symbol of the country's dark racial legacy.

The bill calls for a nine-member commission to design a new flag that does not use the Confederate standard and does include the phrase "In God, We Trust." State residents would vote on the design in November. If they reject the new design, Mississippi will go without a state flag until a new design is



MISSISSIPPI: The Mississippi state flag flies in front of the Mississippi State Capitol building in Jackson, Mississippi. — AFP

approved. Democratic senator John Horhn said changing the flag was a "big step... in the journey we are on to recognize everybody's God-given humanity."

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden also hailed the decision. "The arc of the moral universe bent a little more today," he wrote on Twitter, in reference to a famous quote on justice by civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King. Votes in both houses of the state's legislature followed weeks of mounting pressure and hours of impassioned debate. Governor Tate Reeves said Saturday that he would sign the bill into law. Racial injustice has been the subject of a renewed and fiery national conversation in the US since the death in May of unarmed African-American man George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer. His killing ignited mass protests and civil unrest across the country that has also led to the destruction of statues of former Confederate military leaders.

'Symbol of terror'

Mississippi in 2001 voted overwhelmingly

to retain its current flag, hailed by its defenders as a proud symbol of southern heritage and history. The push to change the flag has grown dramatically in the past week. "Either change the flag or I won't be representing this State anymore," a star Mississippi State University football player tweeted in recent days. "I meant that," senior running back Kylin Hill, who is African-American, added. "I'm tired." The day after Hill's tweet, the powerful Mississippi Baptist Convention, an association of the state's Baptist churches, called to change the flag's design.

They were soon joined by state business associations. Athletic directors and coaches from Mississippi universities have also urged lawmakers to act. "I understand many view the current flag as a symbol of heritage and Southern pride," country music star Faith Hill, a Mississippi native, tweeted. "But we have to realize that this flag is a direct symbol of terror for our black brothers and sisters." But Governor Reeves warned Saturday that changing the flag would not end racism or end divisions in his state. — AFP

Germany takes on high-stakes EU presidency

BERLIN: Chancellor Angela Merkel hosted French President Emmanuel Macron for talks yesterday, just days before Germany takes on the rotating presidency of the European Union with an economy mired in the worst crisis since World War II. Berlin's chairing of the 27-member bloc will be its last with Merkel in charge, and could be the one that defines the legacy of the leader dubbed the "eternal chancellor".

With the future of the bloc's relationship with Britain still to be determined, a crucial shift to a lower carbon world in the balance and crises from Libya to Syria all jostling for attention, there is no shortage of burning issues to tackle. But it is the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic devastation it has wrought which will dominate and concentrate minds. "This crisis that we're currently experiencing is different compared to any other we have experienced since the founding of Europe," Merkel, in power since 2005, told parliament in an address laying out Berlin's priorities for the EU presidency.

"Alone in Europe, it has claimed more than 100,000 lives. A few weeks of economic standstill was enough to endanger what we have built up over years." With all to play for, member states are anxiously looking to Europe's biggest economy to take charge. In an interview published Saturday, Eu-

ropean Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said it was "very fortunate that Germany is taking over the presidency at this time of a major crisis." Merkel's long experience and credibility "helps enormously," she told the Handelsblatt newspaper.

German 'bulldozer'

Besides its geopolitical weight and economic heft, Germany takes on custodianship of the bloc with a strong hand as it has so far withstood the health emergency better than most other member states. Compared to the debt crisis that threatened to sink the single currency zone in 2009-2010, Germany looks very different today - it's out with Scrooge and in with Lady Bountiful. Once an obstinate champion of budgetary rigor, Merkel's government has ditched its no-new-debt dogma to throw resources at the crisis. Its program to shore up the economy totals more than a trillion euros in spending, loans and guarantees.

Together with Macron, Merkel sketched out the backbone of the 750 million-euro (\$840-million) fund proposed by von der Leyen to bolster the bloc's economy. The fund would offer grants - with no repayment obligation - to countries hardest hit by the pandemic, a major policy U-turn for Berlin. With an eye on the devastating blow taken by the worst-hit countries like Spain or Italy, Merkel explained that it was "imperative that Germany not only thinks of itself but is prepared for an extraordinary act of solidarity". "In such a crisis, everyone is expected to do what is necessary. And what is necessary in this case is rather extraordinary," she told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung newspaper. — AFP