

International

Kyrgyzstan holds election marked by voter disillusion and party splits

Coalition uncertain about president's ability to forge new alliances

BISHKEK: Kyrgyzstan held a parliamentary election yesterday with many voters disillusioned with the political elite and anxious about the worst economic crisis in two decades.

President Sooronbai Jeenbekov's supporters look likely to win a significant number of seats in the legislature in the Central Asian country, a close ally of Russia. But the current pro-presidential ruling coalition is certain to be upset due to internal splits in the two major political groups, testing the president's ability to forge new political alliances.



Vote-buying charges mar campaigning

"There is less and less democracy, systemic opposition is virtually non-existent," Nasyrbek Attokulov, a 50-year-old university lecturer, said after casting his ballot in Bishkek.

The campaign was marred by allegations of vote-buying, and an August opinion poll ordered by the US-backed International Republican Institute showed that 15 percent of respondents favored the idea of voting against all parties. A total of 16 parties are contesting 120 seats in the single-chamber parliament. If none of them wins more votes than the "Against all" option, a new election would have to be called.

The economy and corruption topped voters' con-

cerns. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development expects Kyrgyzstan's gross domestic product to plunge 9.5 percent in 2020 due to the pandemic and take years to recover. "The economic situation is terrible," said a businessman, who identified himself only by his first name Kanat, speaking at a polling station where officials let in voters in small groups after measuring their temperature as a coronavirus precaution. "We need to establish the rule of law."

The country of 6.5 million people has a history of political turmoil: in the past 15 years, two presidents have been toppled by revolts and a third is in prison after falling out with his successor.

Further instability would be a concern to Russia. Moscow operates a military airbase in the former Soviet republic and is already dealing with major crises involving its allies Belarus and Armenia. Two parties that won more than a half of the seats in the 2015 election have split ahead of yesterday's vote, and some of their MPs including Jeenbekov's closest allies are seeking reelection under new banners.

The Birimdik (Unity) party is viewed as loyal to Jeenbekov and includes the president's brother and former parliamentary speaker Asylbek Jeenbekov among its candidates. Its main rival, Mekenim Kyrgyzstan (My Homeland Kyrgyzstan), is associated with a powerful clan whose figurehead Rayimbek Matraimov—a former customs service official—was the target of anti-corruption protests last year.

Both parties have spoken in favour of further integration with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union bloc, which has raised the status of hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz migrants working in Russia since Bishkek joined in 2015.

But Birimdik's party chairman Marat Amankulov



BISHKEK: Kyrgyz President Sooronbai Jeenbekov wearing a face mask casts his ballot at a polling station during parliamentary election in Bishkek yesterday amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. — AFP

sparked indignation after comments emerged from last year of him saying it was "time to return" to Moscow's fold. Rivals accused him of undervaluing Kyrgyz independence. In a meeting with Russian leader Vladimir Putin in Sochi ahead of the vote, Jeenbekov warned of "forces" that wanted to "drive a wedge into the (Kyrgyz-Russian) alliance"—an apparent reference to a pro-sovereignty rally held in opposition to Amankulov's comments in the capital Bishkek last Sunday.

On Friday, the state prosecutor said it was investigating a video widely distributed on messaging apps.

The video, which purported to show two male students from a top university secretly filmed in a hotel room, appeared to imply that opposition parties were

supportive of homosexuality, which is deeply frowned on in the conservative country. The opposition parties targeted in the video said this was an attempt to smear them ahead of the vote.

Political drama

Popular uprisings unseating two authoritarian presidents in the space of five years were seen as the driving force behind a fresh constitution to curb authoritarian excess and contain political in-fighting in 2010. Electoral laws dictate that no one party can take more than 65 seats in the legislature.

Presidents are limited to a single six-year term—a departure from the strongman trend seen in neighboring China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Tensions between the president and his predecessor Atambayev grew following Jeenbekov's electoral victory in 2017, peaking last year with a shootout at Atambayev's residence between the former president's armed supporters and state security forces trying to arrest him. Atambayev was detained on charges of illegally releasing a crime boss from jail and jailed for 11 years in June. He has also been charged in the murder of a special forces officer who died during the raid. — Agencies

News in brief

Colombia rebel killings

BOGOTA: Former FARC rebels on Saturday took responsibility for six murders including that of Alvaro Gomez, a Colombian ex-presidential candidate killed in 1995, in a letter sent to a special court for peace. Justice for Peace (JEP), which is investigating crimes committed during the conflict between the ex-guerrillas and the government, said in a statement that the letter it received September 30 sought to "tell the truth, clarify the facts and take responsibility" for several killings. In addition to the murder of Alvaro Gomez, on November 2, 1995, they included the killing of a retired general, Fernando Landazabal, in 1998, and of former peace adviser Jesus Antonio Bejarano in 1999. — AFP

Solomon Islands virus case

HONIARA, Solomon Islands: The Solomon Islands announced they have lost the battle to stay free of the coronavirus, leaving just nine small, remote territories that have not reported a single case. Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare told the Pacific island nation in a televised address that a student who recently arrived from the Philippines on a repatriation flight carrying 96 passengers had returned a positive test. "It pains me to say that we have lost our Covid-19-free status despite our collective effort to prevent the pandemic from entering our country," Sogavare said Saturday. He urged the population of 600,000 in the archipelago to remain calm and said contact tracing and other measures to prevent the spread of the virus had been activated and there was no need for a lockdown. — Reuters

Widodo defends COVID record

JAKARTA: Indonesian President Joko Widodo defended his record of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, asking for no "polemics" or "commotion" amid criticism that he is putting the economy over public health. The video statement late on Saturday came as the world's fourth-most populous country's COVID-19 caseload rose to 299,506. Its 11,055 coronavirus-related death toll is among the highest in Asia. The government's handling of the pandemic since March has drawn criticism from some public health experts for prioritizing economic over public health concerns. — Reuters

Black woman to lead Canada party

OTTAWA: Toronto lawyer Annamie Paul was Saturday named head of the Green Party, becoming the first Black woman to lead a national political party in Canada. The 47-year-old mother of two, the daughter of immigrants from the Caribbean, described herself as a "descendant of slaves." Paul hailed her victory as a "historic moment" during her speech after the announcement of the results of the internal ballot in Ottawa. "We have done something that has never been done before in Canadian politics," said the Jewish lawyer, who has reported being the victim of anti-Semitic attacks on social media. — AFP

Outrage over Montreal death

MONTREAL: Thousands of demonstrators marched Saturday in Montreal to denounce what they said was systemic racism, after an indigenous woman filmed herself being insulted by nurses before dying in the hospital. Shouting "Justice for Joycel!" and "Racism is a virus," the protesters demonstrated peacefully in the city's downtown against a backdrop of drums and traditional song. Joycel Echaquan, a 37-year-old Atikamekw woman and mother of seven, died earlier this week at Joliette Hospital in Montreal under controversial circumstances. In a video lasting several minutes, which she filmed from her hospital bed on her cell phone and posted to Facebook, Echaquan is heard calling for help and screaming in pain, as two hospital staff insult her. — AFP



NEW DELHI: National Congress leader Rahul Gandhi (center) speaks to supporters before being allowed to move with his sister Priyanka Gandhi and other party leaders towards the Uttar Pradesh state to meet the relatives of the 19-year-old allegedly gang-raped victim, at the Delhi Noida Direct flyway toll plaza on Saturday. — AFP

India's federal police to probe gang-rape of Dalit woman

NEW DELHI: India's federal investigators will take over the probe into the alleged gang-rape and murder of a low-caste teenage woman that has sparked nationwide outrage and days of protests. The 19-year-old woman from the marginalized Dalit community was attacked in mid-September in northern Uttar Pradesh state and died on Tuesday, in the latest case highlighting India's epidemic of sexual violence. The Dalit woman died of her injuries earlier this week, triggering protests by both opposition political parties and the public in New Delhi and elsewhere against atrocities against a community often ostracized under India's centuries-old caste system. India is one of the world's most dangerous places for women, with a rape occurring on average every 15 minutes based on federal data. In December 2012, the gang rape of a 23-year-old woman sparked nationwide outrage and led to a tough new anti-rape law.

Five senior police officers have already been suspended over the investigation amid criticism of law enforcement's actions—including the cremation of the woman's body in the middle of the night against the wishes of her family. The chief minister of the state—India's most populous with 200 million people—announced the decision to transfer the probe to the Central Bureau of Investigation late Saturday. "We are committed to giving the strictest punishment to the people responsible for this incident," Yogi Adityanath, who is from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), wrote on Twitter.

The police have arrested four high-caste men on the charges of gang-rape and murder. Local authorities barricaded the village after the cremation to block opposition politicians and media from meeting the victim's family. The decision was reversed Saturday after widespread criticism. The involvement of leaders of the opposition Congress party, Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi, in several demonstrations has sparked accusations from the BJP that they were politicizing the issue. The young woman's death comes months after four men were hanged for the 2012 gang-rape and murder of a student on a bus in New Delhi, in a case that shook the nation. An average of nearly 90 rapes were reported in India every day last year, according to data by the National Crime Records Bureau, but large numbers are thought to go unreported.

India's 200 million low-caste Dalits have long faced discrimination, and campaigners say attacks have increased during the coronavirus pandemic.

The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state, which is ruled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, has asked federal police, the Central Bureau of Investigation, to investigate the alleged rape, which occurred in its Hathras district, a government statement said. Uttar Pradesh's Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has faced criticism in recent days for not allowing media and opposition

parties to speak with the family of the dead woman. Public criticism grew after the family of the victim said her body had been cremated by police without their consent, an allegation officials deny.

On Saturday, hundreds of police officers barricaded a highway connecting the capital New Delhi to Hathras. Several opposition leaders also drove out to meet the victim's family. In India's eastern Kolkata and Bhubaneswar cities, political parties and women organizations marched in protest against the incident and demanded justice for the woman, video footage from ANI news agency showed.

Reprisal fears

Meanwhile, a court in India has ordered police to protect the family of the Dalit woman gang-raped and killed by four high-caste men, as her brother said they feared reprisals over the accusations. With her home village in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh barricaded by hundreds of police, the victim's brother on Thursday told Indian television they were frightened.

"We're not safe in this village. They can do anything to us. We don't trust the police or the administration. Our fears have increased now," he said. "We're on their radar more than ever before. They won't let us live. We might have to leave the village. We don't trust politicians." The state's high court on Thursday ordered authorities to "ensure that no coercion, influence or pressure is exerted upon the family members of the deceased in any manner, by anyone." — Agencies

Myanmar volunteers under strain as virus toll grows

YANGON: As Myanmar's coronavirus infections soar, the work never seems to stop for volunteers who have stepped in to help carry those suspected of symptoms to quarantine centers or hospitals. "The situation is not good. Our ambulances and crews can't even get a break," said Kyi Myint, 66, who leads a volunteer group in Yankin township, one of the worst hit in Myanmar's main city, Yangon.

Myanmar's thousands of volunteers are a crucial element of the COVID-19 response in a country with one of the world's weakest health systems. Myanmar appeared to have avoided the worst of the pandemic with only seven deaths a month ago — but a surge of infections has sent now the death toll to 371 from more than 16,500 cases. According to Reuters data, Myanmar's death toll has doubled in 7.8 days — faster than any other country recording more than five deaths. More than 45,000 people, including COVID-19 patients, those yet to be tested, their close contacts and returning migrant workers, are being housed in buildings from schools and monasteries to government offices and tower blocks. Most of those are run by volunteers, who generally get no compensation. — Reuters

12-year 'rag picker' buried at Indian dump found dead

AHMEDABAD: Indian rescuers on Saturday found the body of a 12-year-old "rag picker" under a mountain of trash which collapsed on her last week. Neha Vasava was scavenging at the biggest garbage dump in Ahmedabad, Gujarat state, last Saturday when a huge wall of garbage collapsed on her and a seven-year-old boy who was with her.

The boy was saved by the locals and other so-called ragpickers, as his head was still visible. An estimated four million Indians—many of them children—work in filthy, dangerous conditions, sifting through trash for metal and other materials to sell. "We have found the body of the 12-year-old girl," a fire department official told AFP.

The official said the decomposed body had been sent for a postmortem to ascertain the cause of death. Rescuers had faced difficult conditions during the search, with packs of roaming feral dogs and tons of suffocating garbage. The Ahmedabad dump, which receives about 3,500 tons of garbage a day from the city of 5.6 million people, is home to several hundred impoverished families who work as rag pickers. According to UNICEF, well over 41 million children aged under 12 are forced to work in South Asia.

India's coronavirus lockdown is thought to have pushed more children into work after their parents fell into poverty, experts say. — AFP



An Indian woman weeps as rescuers on Saturday found the body of a 12-year-old "rag picker" under a mountain of trash which collapsed on her last week. — AFP

Cambodia razes US-funded defense facility

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia: Cambodia has razed a US-funded defense facility on its southern coast, the deputy prime minister confirmed yesterday, the latest move in the ongoing controversial expansion of a strategically crucial naval base being developed with Chinese aid. The Wall Street Journal reported last year on a secret draft deal allowing China to dock warships at the Ream naval base near the kingdom's coastal city of Sihanoukville.

But Cambodia—awash in recent years with Chinese investments—has strenuously denied the report, although strongman premier Hun Sen has said aid from Beijing will fund the naval base's development. Satellite images released by the Center for Strategic and International Studies this week showed a US-funded facility on Ream's naval base had been demolished, raising questions "about rumoured Chinese access", said the Washington-based think tank. But Tea Banh, Cambodia's deputy prime minister and defence minister, dismissed concerns yesterday. "We relocated the facility to a new spot. We cannot keep it anymore and the building is already old," he told AFP, confirming that it was knocked down last month. — AFP