

International

Malaysia opposition leader Anwar claims 'formidable' majority to form new govt

Muhyiddin has fallen as prime minister: Anwar

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said yesterday he has secured a 'strong, formidable' majority from lawmakers to form a new government and oust Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin from power.

However, it remains uncertain if he would be able to form a government as he is yet to receive the nod from Malaysia's king, who could instead choose to call for elections on Muhyiddin's advice to end

"We have a strong, formidable majority. I'm not talking about four, five, six (seats), I'm talking about much more than that," Anwar told reporters. "With these numbers, Muhyiddin has fallen as PM."

Anwar said he commanded support from close to two thirds of the legislature's 222 lawmakers, without giving actual numbers or disclosing who had pledged support, though he did stress that the majority of lawmakers backing him were Malay Muslims.

Muhyiddin's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Representatives for Malaysia's biggest Malay parties, including the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Islamist party PAS and Mahathir's party, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Anwar's next step would be to meet with the king, Sultan Abdullah. The king plays a largely ceremonial role in Malaysia but he could appoint a prime minister who in his view is likely to command a majority in parliament. He could also dissolve parliament and trigger elections on the premier's advice.

Anwar said he was scheduled to meet with the king on Tuesday but it had to be cancelled as the king was unwell and had to be taken to a hospital. Analysts said elections were more likely to end the political uncertainty.

"If Anwar has the numbers, snap polls will be very likely," said Adib Zalkapli, director at political consultancy BowerGroupAsia. Muhyiddin came to power in March after securing a parliamentary majority with the support of UMNO, which was defeated in the 2018 election. His opponents have accused him of grabbing power by shifting alliances instead of earning it at the ballot box.



KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim (C) and his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail (R) leave after a press conference at a hotel in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. — AFP

Anwar, 73, has had a tumultuous political career. At first a rising star of Malaysian politics and UMNO, he was jailed for sodomy and corruption after being fired as deputy prime minister by Mahathir in 1998.

He was again jailed on sodomy charges in 2015, when Najib Razak was prime minister.

Anwar and his supporters described all the charges brought against him as a plot to destroy his political career. He was granted a royal pardon in 2018, as part of the deal with Mahathir for him to succeed the premiership, after the two had forged an alliance to defeat Najib in the 2018 election. — Reuters



Razor-thin majority

months of political volatility.

Muhyiddin has a razor-thin majority in parliament and has already hinted at polls to win a stronger mandate. And there is a risk that political upheavals could delay delivery of government support measures for an export-focused economy that has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic.

If Anwar is awarded the premiership of the multi-ethnic Southeast Asian nation it would mark culmination of 22-year long struggle, during which he spent almost 10 years in jail.

Anwar's latest bid for power comes less than seven months after Muhyiddin emerged as leader following uncertainties triggered by the resignation of the previous prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad.

In blast-hit Beirut, Armenian elders determined to stay

BEIRUT: Beirut resident Vany Bandikian once dreamt of travelling outside Lebanon, but after a massive explosion wrecked her neighbourhood, all she wants is to stay in the home her father built. "Never will I leave this home," said the Lebanese Armenian retiree as she sat in her windowless living room.

"The walls speak to me," she said, the endless din of reconstruction work ringing from outside. The August 4 blast at Beirut's port killed more than 190 people, injured thousands and ravaged dwellings in large parts of the capital. Some of the worst-hit areas are home to the city's century-old Armenian community. More than a month since the explosion, construction workers trudge up and down the stairs of Bandikian's 1930s villa. Its tall white columns and cast-iron balconies are still standing, but its windows, now covered with sheets of white plastic, have been blown clean of glass.

Doors cracked in half lie on the tiled floor, and window frames have been dislodged from the walls.

"A lot of people rang me and said: 'Come and live with us'. But I can't. How am I supposed to leave an open house?" said the former French-language teacher, who lives with her sister. Relatives in the United States have urged her to emigrate, but she is not interested. "I really feel rooted in Lebanon," said Bandikian. Some 140,000 Armenians live in Lebanon, mostly descendants of those who escaped the mass killings of their people under the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1917. They are the largest such community in

the Middle East, and have their own schools and university as well as seats in the Lebanese cabinet and parliament.

In Beirut, many live in the Bourj Hammoud neighbourhood, but also in the heavily damaged districts of Geitawi and Mar Mikhail close to the port. Shop signs in the area are often in Armenian, residents use their own dialect, and the elderly often speak halting Arabic.

Though some members of the Armenian community — like many young Lebanese — have emigrated in recent years because of the economic crisis, the older generation is bent on staying. Berjouhi Kasparian, a frail 90-year-old with short white hair, said that even though she had three children living abroad, she would not leave the Geitawi apartment where she has lived on and off since she was 10.

"It will pass. Every country has problems," she said sitting in her living room, surrounded by family photos and handmade crochet doilies. A scar to the side of her mouth is the only visible sign of the nightmare she experienced on the day of the explosion, four days before her birthday. She was standing in her kitchen when a cascade of plates and glasses fell on top of her. With Beirut's hospitals overwhelmed, she had to wait a whole day for someone to dress her wounds. Bandikian and Kasparian have received help to repair their homes from the Lebanese branch of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), a century-old non-profit diaspora organisation.

The charity has fixed 100 homes and started work on 80 others in blast-affected areas, AGBU's Lebanon director Arine Ghazarian said. It hopes to restore 600 homes in total, not all of them belonging to Armenians.

In areas around the port, the explosion dealt a further blow to households already reeling from Lebanon's worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war. Three times a week, AGBU distributes a total



BEIRUT: Residents of the Armenian CAHL nursing home and care center in the Bourj Hammoud neighbourhood of the Lebanese capital Beirut, sit together in the center's courtyard. The August 4 blast at Beirut's port killed more than 190 people, injured thousands and ravaged dwellings in large parts of the capital. Some of the worst-hit areas are home to the city's century-old 140,000-strong Armenian community. — AFP

of 1,500 meals in the Bourj Hammoud and Mar Mikhail neighbourhoods, Ghazarian said.

At a home for the elderly in Bourj Hammoud, its manager Sebouh Terzian said he was grateful a donor had pledged \$22,000 to fix the damaged building. "Hopefully they will come next week and do all the repairs," said the head of the institution, which also relies on non-governmental organisations to feed its 119 residents. But for others in the community, the pain

of the blast is still very raw. In Mar Mikhail, Dikran Geuzubeuyukian, 58, and his teenage children have received food aid and help to renovate their damaged flat. But the cast-iron craftsman said he had mixed feelings about moving back in after the repairs have been finished. From the kitchen, he can see what remains of the port's grain silos, while in the corridor, there is the place where he found his wife Liza, who died in the explosion. — AFP

India building collapse toll climbs to 39

MUMBAI: Rescue workers battled rain and cramped conditions to scour through rubble and look for possible survivors as the toll from an apartment building collapse on the outskirts of Mumbai rose to 39, a senior government official said yesterday.

"It's been more than three days, so we don't know if there are any survivors any more, but we are not losing hope," Satya Pradhan, the head of the National Disaster Response Force, told Reuters.

At least eight people are still missing and rescue personnel are clearing debris to look for them, said Pradhan. The building, a three-storey structure in a narrow alley of the industrial town of Bhiwandi, on the north-east outskirts of Mumbai, collapsed early on Monday.

Rescue work has been hampered by rain and a narrow entrance to the alley, which prevented heavy equipment from being brought in to clear debris. Officials are still investigating the cause of the collapse of the structure that housed 54 apartments.

Such disasters are commonplace in India during the monsoon season, as the torrential rains can destabilise old and often illegally constructed buildings. This week's collapse however, is one of the worst such incidents in recent years around Mumbai.

Last month, more than a dozen people were killed when a building collapsed in the industrial town of Mahad, 165 km (100 miles) south of Mumbai. In 2013, more than 120 people were killed in two separate building collapses around Mumbai. — Reuters

China stakes claim as climate leader

BEIJING: The US is guilty of "obstructing" the global fight against emissions, China said yesterday, as Beijing seized the climate agenda by vowing to go carbon neutral by 2060 — a target welcomed by environmentalists despite its patchy detail.

The goals, which include a pledge to reach peak emissions in 2030, are still the most concrete yet announced by China, which is the world's biggest polluter and accounts for a quarter of the planet's greenhouse gas blamed for rising temperatures.

They also open a new divergence in relations with the US, which are already pinched by squabbles over trade, tech, defence and human rights.

Freed Taliban have returned to battlefield

WASHINGTON: A number of Taliban prisoners who were released by the Afghan government as a condition for peace talks have taken up arms again, top official Abdullah Abdullah said Tuesday.

Abdullah, who chairs Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation and is overseeing the government's peace efforts, said discussions with the Taliban in Qatar so far have been positive.

However, he said some — though not the majority — of the 5,000 Taliban prisoners released by the government as a condition for talks had resumed the fight against Kabul.

"I do know that some have returned to the battlefield, which is a violation of the agreement that

they had made," Abdullah said during an online conference with the US Council on Foreign Relations.

Abdullah said talks between the two sides had begun in Doha on a positive note, as the delegations build some familiarity with each other.

Yet the level of violence inside Afghanistan has not fallen, and he called on the United States, which launched the peace process with its own deal with the Taliban, and Pakistan, which maintains ties to the insurgents, to pressure them to agree to a ceasefire.

"Unfortunately, so far, the level of violence is very high and to a level that is not acceptable for the people," Abdullah said.

"I repeat my call to the Taliban themselves and also to all partners who have any leverage over the Taliban to press on that point," Abdullah said he planned to visit Pakistan in the coming days for the first time since 2008.

The persistent violence, and the Taliban's failure to completely cut relations with the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda jihadist groups, was singled out as a

barrier to success by US officials testifying in Congress Tuesday.

US chief negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad said a drawdown of US troops, under the US-Taliban agreement, would halt at around 4,500 remaining in Afghanistan in November while Washington assesses whether the insurgents were living up to their pledges.

"Further withdrawals will be determined based on conditions on the ground and delivery by the Taliban on their commitments," Khalilzad told a hearing of the House oversight committee.

The US has slashed troop numbers in Afghanistan by more than half from above 12,000. Under President Donald Trump's promise to end US involvement in wars abroad, Washington has pledged to withdraw all forces by May 2021, if the Taliban and the government can achieve a solid peace agreement.

"By any measure, the current levels of violence are too high. We know that the reductions are possible," Khalilzad said, noting short ceasefires were respected by the Taliban in the past. — AFP