



Flowers, hope and consent forms for India's huge vaccine rollout

## Coffin stored in break room as LA funeral home overwhelmed

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RAMALLAH: A handout picture provided by the Palestinian Authority's press office (PPO) on Friday, shows Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas (right) handing the elections decree to the chairman of the central election committee Hanna Nasser, in the West Bank city of Ramallah. —AFP

# Abbas announces Palestinian elections

## Long-delayed polls slated for May 22; Hamas welcomes decision

**RAMALLAH, Palestinian Territories:** Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas on Friday announced dates for the first Palestinian elections in more than 15 years, setting legislative polls for May 22 and a July 31 presidential vote. Abbas's Fatah party, which controls the Palestinian Authority based in the occupied West Bank, and the Hamas Islamists, who hold power in Gaza, have for years expressed interest in taking Palestinians back to the polls.

A long-standing rivalry between the two main Palestinian factions was seen as a leading factor in stalling progress towards a new vote. But Fatah and Hamas have lately been engaged in unity talks, reaching an agreement in principle in September to hold elections in 2021.

Hamas on Friday welcomed Abbas's announcement. "In recent months, we have worked to overcome obstacles in order to reach this day," it said in a statement. It added that it looked to "free elections in which voters can express themselves without pressure and without restrictions, in all fairness and transparency".

A statement on the official Palestinian Wafa news agency said Abbas has signed "a presidential decree concerning elections", specifying the May and July dates. "This announcement was eagerly awaited," Palestinian analyst Arif Jaffal, head of the Arab World Democracy and Electoral Monitor, said. "It is a very important step," he said.

The 2005 Palestinian presidential vote saw Abbas elect-

ed with 62 percent support to replace the late Yasser Arafat. There has been no indication from Fatah as to whether the 85-year-old Abbas intends to seek re-election. A rare poll by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Research carried out last year said Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh would beat Abbas in a presidential election.

### East Jerusalem

The statement from Abbas said he expects polls will be held "in all governorates of Palestine, including east Jerusalem", which was annexed by Israel following the 1967 Six-Day War but is considered occupied territory. Israel bans all Palestinian Authority activity in east Jerusalem, and there was no indication the Jewish state would allow a Palestinian vote within the city.

Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who faces his own re-election contest in March, describes Jerusalem as Israel's "undivided capital". Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said his government "was ready to get things going to facilitate the electoral process, in total transparency, while waiting for pluralism".

Some 2.8 million Palestinians live in the West Bank, while the densely populated Gaza Strip is home to two million. The last Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006 saw Hamas win an unexpected landslide. The polls resulted in a brief unity government but it soon collapsed and in 2007, bloody

The election took place after one of the most violent campaigns in years, with harassment and arrests of the opposition, attacks on the media and the deaths of at least 54 people. While the government said the vote went off peacefully, Wine alleged widespread fraud such as ballot box stuffing and said his party agents had in some places been beaten and chased away from polling stations. "Whatever is being declared is a complete sham, we reject it and we dissociate ourselves with it," he said on Friday.

### 'We don't control them'

Wine's home remained sealed off by soldiers and police on Saturday, after he told AFP Friday evening that security forces had breached the fence around it and he felt under "siege". "They jumped over my fence. They came inside my compound. I feel threatened," said the 38-year-old. The army's deputy spokesman Deo Akiiki said the soldiers were there for "his own security and the security of people around him".

However the spokesman for Wine's National Unity Platform (NUP), Joel Ssenyonyi, NUP spokesman says Bobi Wine "is under effective house arrest", and did not rule out protests following the announcement of the vote. "People are angry because their vote has been stolen. They don't need me or Bobi Wine to tell them to get angry... Even we can't control them." Police have advised people not to go out to celebrate or protest when results are announced, citing draconian COVID-19 regulations, which have regularly been used to crack down on the opposition. —AFP

inspired by a militant vision of Sunni Islam and dominated by Arabs.

Tehran has long dismissed claims of links to Al-Qaeda, and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif accused Pompeo of "ending his disastrous career with more warmongering lies." Zarif noted that all the militants who carried out Al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on the United States came from Pompeo's "favorite ME destinations," a pointed reference to Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia.

Daniel L. Byman, a professor at Georgetown University, described the relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda as "troubled and mutually suspicious." "In general, there is cooperation, and Iran does provide some sanctuary," he said, adding that "Iran has put limits on Al-Qaeda even as it has provided a haven".

The New York Times reported that Pompeo succeeded in "bewildering counterterrorism officials" with his comments, with some saying his assertions "appeared to represent his own analytic conclusions" rather than those of US intelligence. "The relationship between Al-Qaeda and Iran since 9/11 has vacillated between periods of hostility and cautious accommodation," said Bryce Loidolt, a research fellow at the Washington-based Institute for National Strategic Studies. —AFP

clashes erupted in the Gaza Strip between the two principal Palestinian factions, with Hamas ultimately seizing control of Gaza. Numerous attempts at reconciliation, including a prisoner exchange agreement in 2012 and a short-lived coalition government two years later, have failed to close the rift.

But experts have said intra-Palestinian reconciliation talks have taken on greater urgency following a series of US-brokered normalization agreements signed between Israel and four Arab states. The deals to normalize ties with Israel signed by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco

and Sudan were condemned across the Palestinian political spectrum. They also broke with decades of Arab League consensus against recognition of Israel until it reached an agreement to end the Palestinian conflict that included the creation of Palestinian state, with a capital in east Jerusalem.

Palestinian leaders have also voiced hope that the incoming administration of US President-elect Joe Biden will lead to renewed diplomacy on the Palestinian cause. The PA cut ties with President Donald Trump's administration, accusing it of egregious bias towards Israel. —AFP

## Museveni extends 35-year rule with disputed election win

**KAMPALA:** Uganda's Yoweri Museveni has won a sixth term in office with almost 60 percent of votes, in an election his main rival Bobi Wine has said was marred by fraud and violence, the electoral commission announced yesterday. The veteran leader, who took power in 1986, is one of Africa's longest serving presidents, and faced a stiff battle from the 38-year-old former ragga singer whose turn to politics fired up the youthful population.

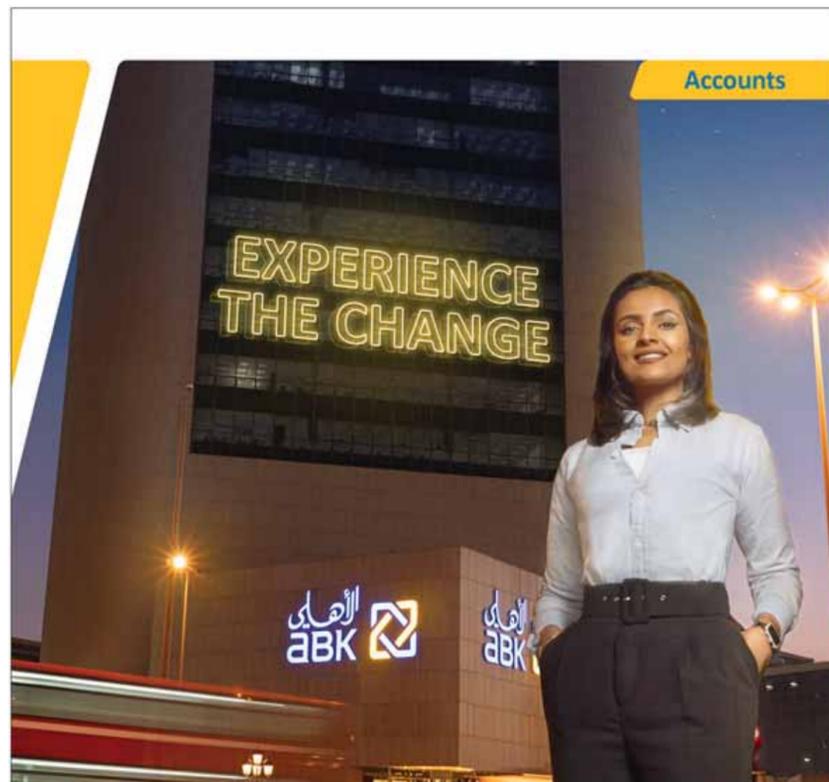
Wine was under heavy guard at his home on the outskirts of Kampala as results were announced, with his party saying he was under "effective house arrest", while the government said it was merely providing him with security. The singer-turned-MP was among 10 opposition candidates and came second with 34.8 percent of the votes, behind Museveni with 58.6 percent.

"The electoral commission declares Yoweri Museveni... elected President of the republic of Uganda," said election commission chairman Justice Simon Mugenyi Byabakama. He said turnout was 57.22 of almost 18 million registered voters. Byabakama urged the population to "remain calm and accept the outcome of these elections" while reminding those celebrating to be mindful of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Friend or foe? Controversy over Iran-Qaeda claim

**PARIS:** Iran has for years faced accusations of cooperation with Al-Qaeda despite stark ideological differences, but while mutual interests may have sometimes converged any relationship has been marked by distrust, analysts say. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's claim-made just a week before President Donald Trump leaves office-that Iran was the "new Afghanistan" for Qaeda militants surprised observers, who said there was no evidence of the country being used as a base.

He also stated publicly for the first time that Al-Qaeda's number two, Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, known as Abu Muhammad Al-Masri, was assassinated in Tehran in August, buttressing allegations that Iran has at times offered sanctuary to the extremists. On paper, Iran and Al-Qaeda are ideological foes-the former the Persian regional heavyweight guided by Shia Islam, the latter



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