



Crowds jeer Sri Lankan PM on rare outing

Lula launches new presidential campaign to 'rebuild Brazil'

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HONG KONG: John Lee (C) celebrates with his wife Janet (R) after he was named as the city's new leader in Hong Kong on May 8, 2022. John Lee, the former security chief who oversaw the crackdown on Hong Kong's democracy movement, was declared the business hub's new leader by a small committee of Beijing loyalists. — AFP

Ex-security chief anointed Hong Kong's leader

Outgoing leader Carrie Lam to leave office with record-low approval ratings

Northern Ireland in limbo after Sinn Fein triumphs

BELFAST: Northern Ireland's feuding leaders came under pressure Sunday to unite in a new government after the Irish nationalist party Sinn Fein secured an unprecedented election win. Once the political wing of the paramilitary IRA, Sinn Fein won enough seats in the devolved legislature to nominate its Northern Ireland leader Michelle O'Neill as first minister.

The result from Thursday's election for the Stormont assembly marked a potentially seismic shift, a century after Northern Ireland was carved out as a Protestant fiefdom under British rule. O'Neill said the result "ushers in a new era" for the divided territory, and Sinn Fein said it wanted a referendum on reuniting Ireland within five years.



MAGHERAFELT, United Kingdom: Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and Irish republican Sinn Fein party member Michelle O'Neill (C) reacts after being elected on the first count to the Northern Ireland Assembly, at the Magherafelt Meadowbank sports centre in Magherafelt, Co Londonderry. — AFP

But only the UK government can grant a referendum, and Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis noted that a majority of voters overall still backed the constitutional status quo. Ahead of convening party leaders for talks in Belfast on Monday, Lewis recognised nevertheless that Sinn Fein's triumph was a "significant moment for Northern Ireland". "I think it is an important moment to show that everybody can work together, regardless of who is first and deputy first minister," he told BBC television. "That's what democracy is about," Lewis added, urging the leaders to "work with each other to find a way to come back into Stormont (and) form the executive". The Irish and US governments also urged Northern Ireland's leaders to form a new power-sharing executive, under the terms of a 1998 peace deal that ended three decades of bloodshed.

Johnson under pressure too

With all 90 Stormont seats filled from Thursday's proportional voting, Sinn Fein won 27 seats, ahead of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) on 25 and the cross-community Alliance party on 17. "The people have spoken, and our job is now to turn up. I expect others to turn up also," O'Neill told reporters. But DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson demanded Prime Minister Boris Johnson first "deliver on his word" and scrap post-Brexit trading rules with the EU, which unionists fear are casting Northern Ireland adrift from the UK.

Lewis said the government still preferred to negotiate a solution with Brussels-but reserved the right to act unilaterally to protect intra-UK trade and Northern Ireland's constitutional status. "It's very disappointing that what we're hearing is the EU is already saying it won't show any flexibility," the minister said.—AFP

HONG KONG: A former security chief who oversaw the crackdown on Hong Kong's democracy movement was anointed the business hub's new leader on Sunday by a small committee of Beijing loyalists. John Lee, 64, was the only candidate in the Beijing-backed race to succeed outgoing leader Carrie Lam.

The elevation of Lee, who is under US sanctions, places a security official in the top job for the first time after a tumultuous few years for a city battered by political unrest and debilitating pandemic controls. Despite the city's mini-constitution promising universal suffrage, Hong Kong has never been a democracy, the source of years of public frustration and protests since the 1997 handover to China.

Its leader is instead chosen by an "election committee" currently comprised of 1,461 people—roughly 0.02 percent of the city's population. After a brief secret ballot on Sunday, 99 percent of those who cast ballots (1,416 members) voted for Lee while only eight voted against, according to officials.

Political pluralism

Beijing hailed the near-unanimous result, saying it showed "Hong Kong society has a high level of recognition and approval" for Lee. "This is a real demonstration of democratic spirit," the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office said.

European Union's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell countered that the selection process was a "violation of democratic principles and political pluralism". Borrell described Sunday's result as "yet another step in the dismantling of the 'one country, two systems' principle" where Beijing

promised Hong Kong could maintain key freedoms and autonomy.

Under President Xi Jinping, China is remoulding Hong Kong in its own authoritarian image after huge and sometimes violent democracy protests three years ago. Beijing deployed a sweeping national security law to stamp out dissent and rolled out a new "patriots only" political vetting system to guarantee anyone standing for office is considered suitably loyal.



'It's just an empty gesture'

Protests have been largely outlawed, with authorities enforcing an anti-coronavirus ban on public gatherings of more than four people as well as the security law. The League of Social Democrats—one of the only remaining pro-democracy groups—held a three-person protest before polls opened Sunday, chanting "Power to the people, universal suffrage now". "We know this action will have no effect, but we don't want Hong Kong to be completely silent," protester Vanessa Chan said as dozens of police officers looked on.

A troubled city

While the democracy movement has been crushed, much of the population

still resents Beijing's rule and chafes at the city's entrenched inequality. Hong Kong also faces economic difficulties thanks to two years of strict pandemic curbs that have damaged its business hub reputation and left residents cut off as rivals re-open.

Lee was asked by reporters on Sunday whether he lacked a genuine mandate. "I do understand there will be time that is needed for me to convince the people," he replied. "But I can do that by action." He said he planned to build a Hong Kong that is "full of hope, opportunities and harmony" now that authorities had "restored order from chaos".

So far, his campaign has been light on concrete policy details—in particular how he plans to reopen Hong Kong to both international and mainland travel at a time when China is doubling down on its strict zero-COVID strategy.

'Empty gesture'

Hong Kong's chief executives find themselves caught between the democratic aspirations of the city's residents and the authoritarian demands of

Beijing's leaders. Outgoing leader Carrie Lam is on track to leave office with record-low approval ratings. According to a survey in March by the Public Opinion Research Institute, about 24 percent of the public has confidence in Lee, compared with 12 percent for Lam.

Waiting in a line outside a restaurant on Sunday, 25-year-old resident Alex Tam said he and his friends were paying little attention to proceedings. "It's just an empty gesture," he told AFP.

"If he didn't listen to the protesters, I don't see how he would listen to young people now, especially those who criticise the government." Retired businessman Yeung Wing-shun was more positive, saying he hoped Lee would guide Hong Kong with a "firm hand", adding that he believed the new leader could bring different sectors together.

Lee will take office on July 1, the 25th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China from Britain and the halfway point of "One Country, Two Systems". Beijing and Lee say that formula is still intact. Critics, including many Western powers, say it has been shredded.—AFP

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