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Pakistan names ex-spymaster as army chief

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TAIPEI: Independent Taipei mayoral candidate Huang Shan-shan (center) poses with a basket of 'lucky vegetables' received by supporters during an election campaign at the Huannan Market in Taipei. — AFP

Taiwan politicians flaunt good luck veggies on campaign trail

Political culture infused with symbols and superstition

TAIPEI: In many parts of the world, a politician might hope for a picture-perfect moment with a voter's baby to boost their poll numbers. But in Taiwan, vegetables are the kings of the campaign trail. Whenever the democratic island of 23 million people goes into election mode, prospective candidates race to pose with smorgasbords of vegetables - large white radishes are a favorite - gifted by voters hoping to show their approval.

The reason is Taiwan's love of homonyms: words that sound identical or similar but can carry multiple meanings. In a political culture infused with good luck symbols and superstition - where candidates often seek advice from feng-shui masters when deciding the location or opening date of their campaign headquarters - photo-ops with the right vegetable are routine. Garlic (suan) is immensely popular because when pronounced in Taiwanese it also sounds like the word for "chosen".

The daikon radish (tsai-tao) is a winner because it is pronounced nearly the same as "good luck", while pineapple (ong-lai) is a homonym for "prosperity comes". Ke Chiong-shu, 60, has been selling vegetables at the Wuxing Street Market in the capital Taipei

for more than a decade. Many of her district's candidates have visited the market in recent weeks as Taiwan gears up to hold island-wide local elections on Saturday.

When AFP visited recently, it was former health minister Chen Shih-chung's turn to press the flesh as he campaigned for the Taipei mayoralty, one of the most important posts up for grabs this weekend. Ke grabbed some radish and garlic greens from her stall. "Hope you get elected," she beamed as Chen proudly turned around to display the gifted veggies to the chanting crowd behind. "I give to all candidates regardless of their party affiliation," Ke added. "I hope they all get elected so that they can serve us folks and strive for our benefit."

Progressive democracy

After shaking off decades of martial law, Taiwan has evolved into one of Asia's most vibrant and progressive democracies - a stark contrast to Communist Party-run China, which claims the island as its own and has vowed to one day take it, by force if necessary. It can feel like Taiwan is in near-constant campaign mode. Presidential and parliamentary elections are held every

four years and are often dominated by relations with Beijing. In between are local elections held for a variety of positions, from mayoral posts in big cities to indigenous administrators and village chiefs. Taiwan also has referendum laws that allow voters to regularly decide on a host of constitutional issues. Saturday's local election, for example, includes a referendum on whether to lower the voting age from 20 to 18.

Bread-and-butter issues

Local polls tend to be much less focused on geopolitics and centre more on bread-and-butter issues like bad roads, stagnant wages and recent rising inflation. "Something that is very special about Taiwanese local elections is how personable things get," political scientist Lev Nachman, who studies Taiwanese electoral politics, told AFP.

Face-to-face greetings and a handshake or slight bow can go a long way in garnering support for a candidate. "Older voters like to see their politicians in markets and early in the morning out on the streets," Nachman explained. Under President Xi Jinping, China has become much more belligerent towards Taiwan, and Beijing has cut official communications

with the island since President Tsai Ing-wen was first elected in 2016.

Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party, which has won the last two elections, sees Taiwan as a de facto sovereign nation. The opposition is dominated by the Kuomintang party, which favors warmer ties with China. Relations with Beijing plunged in August when it conducted huge military drills around Taiwan to protest a visit to the island by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. But despite the very real threat of conflict, the drama has received minimal attention in the lead-up to this Saturday's polls.

"Even though we just went through these very high-tension military drills in August, those aren't really being talked about by local candidates," Nachman said. "Instead, it is much more about attacking opponents based on the quality of their character," he added. Nonetheless, Lin Pei-ying, 36, a DPP candidate who is running for councilor in the north-eastern county of Yilan, says she believes her party's commitment to maintaining Taiwan's democratic way of life will still feed into voters' decisions. "We are sending a message to China," she told AFP. "Taiwan is Taiwan, China is China." —AFP

Malaysia new PM: From jail to power, a dream fulfilled

KUALA LUMPUR: It has been a bumpy road to the pinnacle of power for Anwar Ibrahim, who on Thursday achieved his dream of the Malaysian premiership. In his decades-long quest for the top job, the 75-year-old has tasted political triumph and defeat, led street protests for democratic reforms and strung together a multi-ethnic opposition coalition while behind bars. He was named prime minister by Malaysia's king after days of political deadlock resulting from an inconclusive election.

Impatient firebrand

Anwar was born into a political family in August 1947. His father, Ibrahim Abdul Rahman, was a former member of parliament and his mother, Che Yan Hussein, was a political organiser in the northern state of Penang, in what was then part of the British empire. A firebrand youth activist during his student days, Anwar has spoken of his admiration for Philippine revolutionary hero Jose Rizal, describing him as "a true Asian renaissance man". In 1982, Anwar was recruited into the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the party then in the middle of its 60-year domination of Malaysian politics.

His star rose, and the suave young politician became finance minister and then deputy prime minister in the early 1990s under then-premier Mahathir Mohamad, bringing a youthful counterbalance to the wily political veteran. They were considered one of the most dynamic duos in Southeast Asian politics, but their relationship soured over how to handle the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Some observers say Anwar had been too impatient to become prime minister, slighting his patron. Mahathir sacked Anwar, who was also expelled from UMNO and charged with corruption and sodomy.

He was sentenced to six years in jail for corruption



KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's newly appointed Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail leave after the swearing-in ceremony at the National Palace in Kuala Lumpur on November 24, 2022. —AFP

in 1999, with a nine-year prison term added for the sodomy charge the following year, the two sentences to run consecutively. As Anwar claimed political persecution, street protests erupted and coalesced into a multi-ethnic opposition movement calling for democratic reforms. Photos of Anwar with a black eye, inflicted in prison by Malaysia's then-police chief, were published in newspapers around the world, turning him into a symbol for a struggle that adopted the battle cry of "Reformasi!", or reforms.

The Malaysian Supreme Court overturned Anwar's sodomy conviction in 2004 and ordered him freed. He took a brief hiatus from politics to go into academia, but returned to lead an opposition coalition in the 2013 general election. His alliance won 50.87 percent of the popular vote but failed to muster a parliamentary majority. Controversy continued to hound the married father of six. He was again jailed for sodomy in 2015, this time for five years. He has maintained his innocence and received a full pardon from the Malaysian king three years into his sentence. Anwar returned to parliament months later in a by-election. —AFP

Palestinians return body of Zionist teen

JERUSALEM: The body of a Zionist teenager snatched by Palestinian militants in the occupied West Bank was returned to his relatives Thursday, following intense talks to avoid an escalation of violence. Prime Minister Yair Lapid had on Wednesday threatened tough reprisals against those who had taken the body of Tiran Fero, a 17-year-old Druze who was critically wounded in a car accident a day earlier. The Zionist military said his body was released "as a result of the efforts of the security forces and in coordination with the Palestinian authorities."

The abduction from a Jenin hospital was not immediately claimed by any particular group, but local sources told AFP that Palestinian militants were holding the body in the city's refugee camp where various factions are present. Zionists, or their mortal remains, have previously been abducted to be used as bargaining chips to secure the release of Palestinian pris-

oners or the return of the bodies of Palestinians seized by Zionist entity. "There were two ways to have this body returned," a military official told journalists. "One, through the Palestinian Authority.

And two, was going in for a military operation in the city, in the camp, that's probably... very, very violent," he added. Zionist forces frequently launch deadly raids in Jenin in pursuit of militants, although civilians including American-Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh have also been killed in such operations. The Zionist official said the militants had wrongly thought Fero was a soldier and negotiations were handled through the Palestinian Authority.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz thanked Palestinian officials on Twitter for "this humanitarian gesture that comes after a miserable and inhumane act". The PA nominally controls urban centers across the West Bank, which has been occupied by Zionists since the Six-Day War of 1967. On Thursday, the army reopened two checkpoints between Jenin and Zionist entity which were closed after the teenager's body was seized. The crossings are an economic lifeline for Palestinians, as well as Arabs in Zionist entity, including members of the Druze minority, who visit the northern West Bank frequently. —AFP



DALIYAT AL KARMEL: Druze men carry the coffin of 17-year-old Tiran Fero, on November 24, 2022, during his funeral procession in Daliyat Al Karmel, around 20 kms southeast of Haifa. — AFP