

Sri Lankan presidential rivals welcome record turnout

Both Rajapaksa and Premadasa camps see the high numbers as good augury

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

As voting ended on Saturday, the rival political camps of Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sajith Premadasa in Sri Lanka's presidential election appeared confident that the high turnout would push their candidate past the required 50% mark. A second round of counting will be undertaken to tally preference votes if neither contestant secures over half the vote share.

"Going by the high turnout, it looks like there is a very strong anti-incumbency sentiment," said Namal Rajapaksa, legislator and nephew of Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa. "The fact that the whole country, including the north, has voted in large numbers shows that they all



Future sealed: Election officials bringing ballot boxes to the counting centre in Colombo on Saturday. • REUTERS

want to be part of this democratic process. It is a very healthy sign," he told *The Hindu*.

Cabinet Minister Mano Ganesan said it was "very encouraging" to see the large number of voters exercising their franchise.

"Sajith Premadasa is quite popular in the south and he

has proactively reached out to the minorities across the island in his campaign. We are hopeful that he will win," he said.

Mr. Premadasa is banking heavily on the minority vote, which is widely expected to go in his favour, since prominent Tamil (northeast and hill country) and Muslim

parties have backed him this election. Moreover, many Tamils and Muslims are still fearful of Mr. Rajapaksa, who is accused of war crimes — he has denied them — and is linked to reactionary Sinhala Buddhist groups that have stoked anti-Muslim violence in the past.

Boycott call rejected

The high Tamil turnout in the north and east is also seen as a rejection of repeated calls for a boycott from some political leaders.

"It [turnout] means that the Tamil voter is very pragmatic and knows what is really good for the Tamil people in the given context," said M.A. Sumanthiran, Jaffna district MP and spokesman of the Tamil National Alliance.

Chinese soldiers help clean Hong Kong streets after protests

Their presence could stoke further controversy over city's autonomous status

REUTERS
HONG KONG

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers in shorts and t-shirts made a surprising appearance in some Hong Kong streets on Saturday, briefly helping residents clean up debris after anti-government protests blocked roads, witnesses said.

The presence of PLA troops on the streets, even to help clean up roads near their base, could stoke further controversy over the Chinese-ruled territory's autonomous status. Saturday's clean-up followed some of the worst violence seen this year, after a police operation against protesters at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on Tuesday.

On Saturday night, police



Civic role: Personnel from the People's Liberation Army cleaning up a street in Hong Kong on Saturday. • AFP

fired tear gas while protesters threw petrol bombs, used slingshots, and fired arrows in clashes on streets outside the Polytechnic University.

Hong Kong has been rocked by more than five months of demonstrations by protesters angry at per-

ceived Communist Party meddling in the former British colony, which was guaranteed its freedoms when it returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

Beijing denies interfering and has blamed the unrest on foreign influences.

Earlier, hundreds of pro-

China demonstrators gathered by the city's legislature and police headquarters, waving Chinese and Hong Kong flags. Some held up posters reading "Police we stand with you", while others chanted "Support the police".

Pro-China protests have so far attracted much smaller numbers than those angry at Beijing.

The authorities have since largely stayed away from at least five university campuses that had been barricaded by thousands of students and activists who stockpiled petrol bombs, catapults, bows and arrows and other weapons. Many protesters appeared to have left the campuses by late Saturday, though some remained behind to man barricades.

ELSEWHERE



Don't recall meeting Epstein victim: Andrew

NEW YORK
Britain's Prince Andrew has said he does not remember meeting Virginia Roberts, one of disgraced U.S. financier Jeffrey Epstein's alleged victims, who claims she was forced to have sex with the royal. He has been heavily criticised over his links to Epstein. • AFP

German woman, who joined IS, held on return

BERLIN
A German woman accused of joining the Islamic State group in Syria and marrying an IS fighter has been arrested on arrival in Germany. The woman, identified only as Nasim A., travelled to Syria in 2014 and married an IS fighter. She was detained by Kurdish forces and held in Syria. • AFP

Bolivia on the boil



Face off: Security forces clashing with supporters of Bolivia's former President Evo Morales, who resigned and fled to Mexico, in Sacaba on Saturday. Interim leader Jeanine Anez has said that Mr. Morales would have to "answer to justice" if he returns. • AP

Trump asked about Ukraine investigations: Embassy staff

He allegedly pressed Sondland to seek Kiev's plan on Biden

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

A U.S. official testified on Friday that he overheard President Donald Trump asking about "investigations" he had requested from Ukraine into domestic political rivals — placing the American president at the centre of an alleged conspiracy to extort Kiev.

David Holmes said he heard a phone conversation in a Kiev restaurant in which Mr. Trump, on the other end of the line, pressed Washington's EU Ambassador Gordon Sondland for information on Ukrainian plans to probe former Vice-President Joe Biden.

Details of the conversation were included in Mr. Holmes's opening statement to impeachment investiga-



Donald Trump

Trump and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky — which they say exonerates the U.S. leader.

Mr. Holmes, a career diplomat, said the Trump-Sondland call took place a day later, suggesting that the pressure on Ukraine amounted to a concerted effort rather than just one call.

Mr. Sondland told Mr. Trump that Ukrainian President "loves your ass", Mr. Holmes is said to have testified. "I then heard President Trump ask, 'So, he's gonna do the investigation?'" Mr. Holmes testified, adding that Mr. Sondland replied that Mr. Zelensky "will do anything you ask him to."

Lawmakers who emerged from the deposition declined to provide further details.

Protests erupt in Iran over petrol price hike, one dead

Demonstrations broke out after govt. announced increase in price by 50% for first 60 litres and 300% for anything above that

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

One person was killed and others injured in protests that spread on Saturday across Iran after a surprise decision to impose petrol price hikes and rationing in the sanctions-hit country.

The death on Friday occurred in the city of Sirjan, where protesters tried to set a fuel depot ablaze but were thwarted by security forces, the semi-official ISNA news agency reported.

Demonstrations broke out hours after it was announced on Friday that the price of petrol would be increased by 50% for the first 60 litres and 300% for anything above that each month. The country also imposed petrol rationing, saying the move was aimed at helping needy citizens. The measure was expected to generate 300 trillion rials (\$2.55 billion) per annum, the authorities said.

"Unfortunately someone was killed," Sirjan's acting

Governor Mohammad Mahmoudabadi said, adding it was still unclear if the civilian had been "shot or not".

"Security forces did not have permission to shoot and were only allowed to fire warning shots... which they did," he said.

It was a "calm gathering" exploited by some who "destroyed public property, damaged fuel stations and also wanted to access the oil company's main fuel depots and set fire to them", he added.

Fresh demonstrations were held on Saturday. "Some drivers protested by turning off their cars and creating traffic jams," he said. Under the scheme, drivers with fuel cards would pay 15,000 rials (13 U.S. cents) a litre for the first 60 litres of petrol bought each month, with each additional litre costing 30,000 rials.

President Hassan Rouhani said 75% of Iranians were "under pressure" and are entitled to the extra revenue.



People protesting against petrol price hike on a highway in Tehran, Iran, on Saturday. • REUTERS

Car bomb kills 19 in northern Syria: monitor

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIRUT

A car bomb killed 19 people, 13 of them civilians, in the Turkish-controlled town of Al-Bab in northern Syria on Saturday, a war monitor said.

The bomb, which struck a bus and taxi station in the town, also wounded 33 people, some of them seriously, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.

Turkey and its Syrian proxies control several

pockets of territory on the Syrian side of the border.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the bombing but the Observatory said there had been persistent security incidents in the town since its capture by Turkish troops from the Islamic State group in February 2017. The town was one of the westernmost strongholds of the jihadists' self-styled "caliphate" which was finally eradicated by US-backed Kurdish forces in eastern Syria in March.

SUDOKU

2	9			3	5			
	6		4		8			
5		8						7
	4					8	2	
			8		1			
	8	5					3	
8						6		2
			9	2			1	
			1	8			4	5

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

7	2	8	6	9	3	5	4	1
4	5	3	2	7	1	6	9	8
9	1	6	4	8	5	2	3	7
3	7	5	1	6	4	8	2	9
8	9	2	3	5	7	1	6	4
6	4	1	8	2	9	7	5	3
2	3	4	7	1	6	9	8	5
5	8	7	9	4	2	3	1	6
1	6	9	5	3	8	4	7	2

Obama warns Democratic contenders not to lean too far left

He implicitly targeted Sanders & Warren, who called for a 'political revolution', saying their ideas may not resonate with voters

LISA LERER
WASHINGTON

Former President Barack Obama offered an unusual warning to the Democratic primary field on Friday evening, cautioning the candidates not to move too far to the left in their policy proposals, even as he sought to reassure a party establishment worried about the electoral strength of their historically large primary field.

Speaking before a room of wealthy liberal donors, Mr. Obama urged Democrats to remember the long, combative slog of his primary campaign against Hillary Clinton in 2008, arguing that the 16-month battle ultimately made him a stronger general election candidate.

'I had a robust primary'

"For those who get stressed about robust primaries, I just have to remind you I had a very robust primary," he told the group of donors and organisational leaders in Wash-

ington. "I'm confident that at the end of the process we will have a candidate that has been tested."

Yet, he also raised concerns about some of the liberal ideas being promoted by some candidates, citing health care and immigration as issues where the proposals may have gone further than public opinion.

While Mr. Obama did not attempt to stay out of the primary candidate or policy proposal, he cautioned that the universe of voters that could support a Democratic candidate are not driven by the same views reflected on "certain left-leaning Twitter feeds" or "the activist wing of our party".

"Even as we push the envelope and we are bold in our vision, we also have to be rooted in reality," Mr. Obama said. "The average American doesn't think we have to completely tear down the system and remake it." The comments marked an



Reality check: Former U.S. President Barack Obama speaking at the Obama Foundation Summit in Chicago. • AFP/FILE

extraordinary entrance into the primary contest by the former President, who has been careful to avoid even the appearance of influencing the direction of the race.

His remarks offered an implicit critique of Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who have urged voters to embrace "political revolution" and "big, structural change," as well as proposals once wide-

ly considered to be left of the liberal fringes of the party, including court packing and decriminalising illegal border crossings.

Even as Mr. Obama has attempted to stay out of the race, the primary candidates have engaged in a heated discussion over his legacy, debating whether to stick with Mr. Obama's architecture for health care policy or to pursue a single-payer system

and offering flashes of direct criticism over his record on immigration. At the same time, former Vice-President Joe Biden has made his strong support for Mr. Obama and his accomplishments a hallmark of his candidacy.

'Don't push too far'

Acknowledging that candidates must "push past" his achievements, Mr. Obama urged his party's candidates not to push too far. "I don't think we should be deluded into thinking that the resistance to certain approaches to things is simply because voters haven't heard a bold enough proposal and if they hear something as bold as possible then immediately that's going to activate them," he said.

The fact that Mr. Obama offered his reassurances at the annual meeting of the Democracy Alliance — a club of wealthy liberals who donate hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to recom-

mended political organisations — only underscored the intended audience of his message. In recent weeks, establishment-aligned Democrats, top donors and some strategists have expressed fears that the party lacks a strong enough candidate to defeat President Donald Trump.

Their concerns have prompted the late emergence of two experienced candidates, Deval Patrick, the former Governor of Massachusetts and a close friend of Mr. Obama, and Michael R. Bloomberg, both of whom entered the field after nine candidates had already dropped out.

Those worries are not necessarily shared by voters in early states.

"If you talk to the voters they don't feel the need for another candidate," said Kathy Sullivan, the former chairwoman of the Democratic Party in New Hampshire. • NY TIMES