

Ghani named winner of Afghan election

Rival Abdullah challenges final figures, says he will form own government; Taliban terms results 'illegal'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KABUL
Ashraf Ghani secured a second term as President of Afghanistan on Tuesday, but his rival Abdullah Abdullah immediately challenged the final election figures and said he was forming his own government.

The results of the September 28, 2019 poll were released after lengthy delays following vote-rigging allegations by Mr. Abdullah that led to a recount.

Mr. Abdullah, who serves as Afghanistan's 'Chief Executive' under Mr. Ghani in a tense power-sharing arrangement, said his team was "the victor".

His intent to try to form a separate government brought back memories of the 2014 election, which also saw Mr. Ghani declared winner and Mr. Abdullah protest. That time, Mr. Abdullah's supporters held violent demonstrations before the U.S. finally intervened to broker an awkward deal between the two rivals.



Victory lap: A December 22 photo of Afghanistan's incumbent President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul after he won a slim majority of votes in preliminary results of the presidential election.

But more than five years on, it was not clear how much support Mr. Abdullah would get. The U.S., which is currently negotiating a withdrawal deal with the Taliban, has less interest in Afghanistan's politics than it did in 2014 under then-President Barack Obama. And ordinary Afghans have shown little passion for Mr. Abdullah or the poll process in general, with most of them abstaining from voting in the

lacklustre and personality-driven election that saw candidates pitch few new ideas.

"The fraudsters are the shame of history and we announce our inclusive government," Mr. Abdullah said.

The Taliban also rejected Mr. Ghani's win, calling it "illegal" and "against the peace process".

Earlier, Mr. Ghani had hailed the results, saying in televised comments that "our government, our arms

are open to all the people of Afghanistan".

Peace deal

Election commission chief Hawa Alam Nuristani said Mr. Ghani had taken 50.64% of the votes, compared to Mr. Abdullah's 39.52%.

"May God help him in serving the people of Afghanistan... I also pray that peace comes to our country," she added at a press conference in Kabul.

The final results come just as Washington seeks a deal with the Taliban which would allow it to withdraw troops in return for various security guarantees and a promise that the militants would hold peace talks with the Afghan government.

U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad said on Monday that he was "cautiously optimistic" about progress toward an eventual deal, adding that the U.S. has "commitments from the Taliban on security issues". Once the deal is reached the Afghan government would have to prepare to meet the Taliban and negotiate a formal peace agreement on behalf of the Afghan people.

Political analyst Atta Noori called the results "a step forward towards the possible talks with the Taliban".

"Now is the time for Ghani to act as a statesman and form an inclusive team to talk with the Taliban," he said, adding that people from Mr. Abdullah's camp should be among the negotiators.

Sirisena joins the Rajapaksas in pre-poll alliance in Sri Lanka

He had defected from the Mahinda Rajapaksa govt. in 2015

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's former President Maithripala Sirisena, who defected from the Mahinda Rajapaksa government to the rival political camp before being elected to office in 2015, has re-joined his former colleague and current Prime Minister Mr. Rajapaksa.

Mr. Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) on Monday formed an alliance with the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP or People's Party) to contest the general election scheduled this summer.

Significantly, President Sirisena - who remained neutral in the November presidential election though the SLFP backed President Gotabaya Rajapaksa - will contest the parliamentary election as part of the new alliance in his home constituency Polonnaruwa (North Central Province), according to SLFP general secretary Dayasiri Jayasekara, who is also a State Minister.

"President Sirisena and our team are scheduled to meet with the SLPP leadership to chalk out the strategy for our alliance," Mr. Jayasekara told *The Hindu* on Tuesday. "This must be one of the most powerful coalitions in our history, with three Presidents at the helm," he said, referring to former Presidents Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa, and his younger brother and current President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Re-consolidation

The formation of the new alliance effectively signals a re-consolidation of forces that were earlier aligned to the SLFP, one of Sri Lanka's fore-



Former Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena

most national parties that has produced three Presidents in the past, including Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa.

It was after Mr. Sirisena's defection - he formed government with the rival United National Party (UNP) in 2015 - that the Rajapaksas founded their own party, the SLPP, in 2016.

Mr. Sirisena was left with the SLFP rump, as many of its members joined the Rajapaksas, who pitched the SLPP as their new political vehicle.

The SLPP made its first, big impact when it swept the local government polls in February 2018. Building on that momentum, and subsequently on the incumbency and the perceived failings of the Sirisena-Ranil Wickremesinghe administration, the party mounted what proved to be an effective campaign, leading to Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's big win in November.

"Though SLPP and SLFP may have had some differences in the past, they hold similar policies. Basically, all the left-wing forces have reunited now," said Kehelija

Rambukwella, a Minister and government spokesman. In the 1950s, the SLFP emerged as a centre-left party challenging the economically right-wing UNP. Over the decades, the SLFP's support grew among Sri Lanka's Sinhala-nationalist base and the party drew criticism from others who contested its leftist claim.

"The alliance will work out a mechanism," Mr. Rambukwella said. Asked who would call the shots - Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa has been named leader of the alliance, while Mr. Sirisena has been designated its chairman - he said: "According to the party structure it has got to be general secretary Basil Rajapaksa," referring to the third Rajapaksa brother, a former Minister, and the key election strategist of the Rajapaksa camp.

The alliance is eyeing a two-thirds majority in Parliament in the general election likely in April.

Opposition campaign

Meanwhile, Leader of Opposition Sajith Premadasa is leading the oppositional campaign through an alliance that some political parties representing the hill country Tamil and Muslim minorities have pledged to support.

The development comes after differences emerged within the UNP over party leadership that Mr. Wickremesinghe currently holds and deputy leader Mr. Premadasa reportedly sought. Following internal discussion, Mr. Premadasa was named leader of the UNP-led alliance, while Mr. Wickremesinghe will continue as party leader.

WHO urges calm as China virus death toll nears 1,900

Chinese study of 72,000 patients reveals that 81% of them had only mild infections

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

The death toll from the COVID-19 outbreak rose again on Tuesday but Chinese and international health officials sought to calm global nerves, citing a study showing that most cases are mild and warning against excessive measures to contain the epidemic.

Nearly 1,900 people have died and more than 72,000 others infected by the virus in China, with hundreds more cases in 25 countries.

The situation remains dire

at the epicentre, with the director of a hospital in the central city of Wuhan becoming the seventh medical worker to succumb to the illness. But Chinese officials released a study showing most patients have mild cases of the illness, and the World Health Organization officials said the mortality rate was relatively low.

'Less deadly' than SARS

The official death toll in China hit 1,868 on Tuesday after another 98 people died - most in Hubei and Wuhan,

where the virus emerged in December.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus cautioned that it was too early to tell if the decline would continue.

A study among 72,000 confirmed, suspected and clinically diagnosed cases showed that 81% of patients had only mild infections. Those most at risk were the elderly, and people with underlying medical conditions.

The study released by China's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention also showed that the death rate

stood at 2.3%, falling below one per cent for people in their 30s and 40s.

The research was cited by WHO officials, who said the COVID-19 illness was "less deadly" than its cousins, such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) or the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

Michael Ryan, head of WHO's health emergencies programme, said the outbreak was "very serious" and could grow, but stressed that outside Hubei the epidemic was "affecting a very,

very tiny, tiny proportion of people". There have been some 900 cases around the world, with five deaths.

Another 88 people tested positive for the virus on the quarantined *Diamond Princess* cruise ship off Japan on Tuesday, raising the number of infections to 542.

WHO rejected the suggestion that all cruises should be halted amid the outbreak.

"Measures should be taken proportional to the situation. Blanket measures may not help," Mr. Tedros said.

ELSEWHERE



Jailed Assange's health improving: spokesman

LONDON
Jailed WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is no longer being kept in solitary confinement and his health is improving, his spokesman Kristinn Hrafnsson told reporters on Tuesday. REUTERS

Pak. successfully tests n-capable missile Ra'ad-II

ISLAMABAD
Pakistan conducted a successful flight test of the air launched nuclear-capable cruise missile Ra'ad-II with a range of 600 km on Tuesday, significantly boosting the military's "deterrence capability" on land and at sea.

14 dead in apparent toxic gas leak in Pakistan

Dozens admitted to hospitals in Karachi

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KARACHI

An apparent gas leak killed at least 14 people near the port city of Karachi, officials said on Tuesday, as investigators worked to determine the source of the deadly emission.

Residents of Keamari, a commercial and residential area, began falling sick on Sunday, officials said. A doctor at one hospital, who asked not to be named, said 250 people had been admitted for treatment, after complaining of breathing difficulties and burning eyes. Health Ministry spokesman Zafar Mehdi said 14 people died at various hospitals.

At the state-run Jinnah

Post-graduate Medical Centre, about 35 people arrived for emergency treatment. "Most of the patients were suffering from choking and breathlessness," said Seemim Jamali, who heads the emergency department.

Authorities initially suspected that some sort of gas could have leaked from the port, but the Karachi Port Trust denied that was the case. "All the casualties took place outside the port, and our facility is clean," a port spokesman said.

Authorities have sought help from the navy's chemical and biological department, according to Nasir Shah, Provincial Information Minister.

A rising Bloomberg qualifies for U.S. Democratic debate

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

U.S. media tycoon Michael Bloomberg has qualified for Wednesday's Democratic presidential debate, after a new poll shows him leapfrogging several of his rivals, including Joe Biden, to claim second spot in the race for the party nomination.

Mr. Bloomberg's surge meant that he cleared a polling threshold set by the Democratic National Committee, placing the former New York Mayor on stage to spar with fellow candidates, several of whom have launched broadsides against him, for the first time.

The billionaire businessman, who only jumped into the race in November, near-



Mike Bloomberg

ly a year after many of his rivals, earned 19% support nationally, second to leftist Bernie Sanders at 31%, in an NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist survey.

The moderate former Vice-President Biden came in third at 15% in the poll of some 1,400 registered voters, while progressive Sena-

tor Elizabeth Warren was at 12% and pragmatist Senator Amy Klobuchar at 9%.

"Mike is looking forward to joining the other Democratic candidates on stage and making the case for why he's the best candidate to defeat Donald Trump and unite the country," his campaign said in a statement.

Mr. Bloomberg, a centrist, is likely to face fire in the debate. His fellow Democratic contenders have stepped up their attacks against him in recent days, decrying him for trying to "buy the election" and criticising his support of the "stop-and-frisk" tactic while Mayor that led the police to target mostly black and Hispanic men for searches.

Israeli PM Netanyahu's trial to begin on March 17

He faces three charges of corruption

REUTERS
JERUSALEM

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trial will start on March 17, two weeks after Israel holds its third national election in less than a year, the Justice Ministry said on Tuesday.

Mr. Netanyahu, the first sitting Israeli Prime Minister to be charged with a crime, has denied any wrongdoing in the three corruption cases against him.

In addition to his legal battle, Mr. Netanyahu, who heads the right-wing Likud party, is fighting for his political life in a March 2 election, after inconclusive ballots in April and September. The Ministry said Mr. Ne-

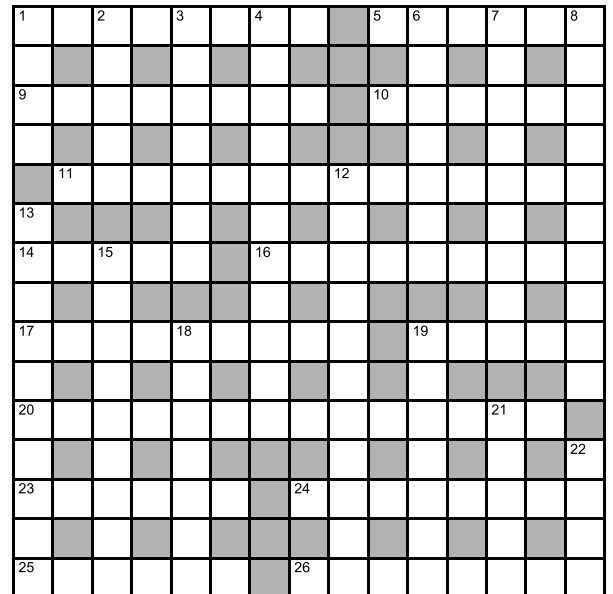


Benjamin Netanyahu

tanyahu will be required to attend the Jerusalem District Court for the first session to hear an indictment against him. Mr. Netanyahu, 70, is accused of wrongfully accepting \$264,000 worth of gifts from tycoons, and of dispensing regulatory favours in alleged bids for improved coverage by a popular news website.

THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12862

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ACROSS

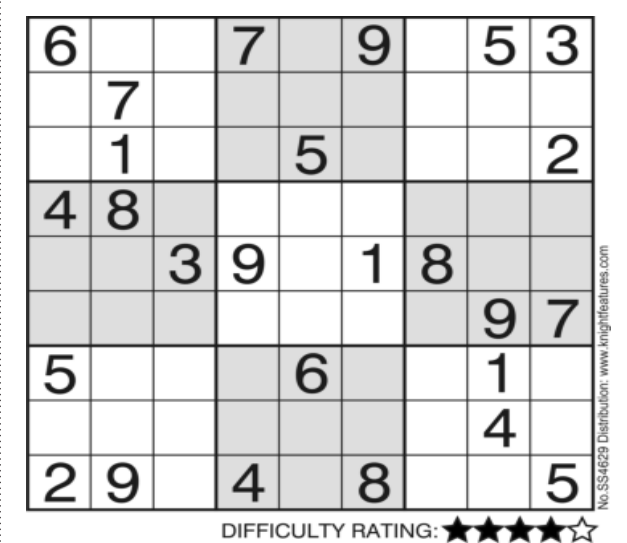
- 1 One in Boston laid the seeds of a revolution... (3,5)
- 5 ...against a piece of poetry in the recital (6)
- 9 Not good to start off the work of a sailor in a pilot's field (8)
- 10 Bully in the plaintiff's cricket club gets dismissed by Bishop (6)

- 11 Tall male welcoming company assignment in a foreign office (4,10)
- 14 Emu cushioned partially by a slimy protective fluid (5)
- 16 Sensible to get behind a little change to become careful with money (5,4)
- 17 Seemingly endless university closure following Dana's disruption (2,7)
- 19 Speedy hedgehog making their push Curie back after confusion at the end (5)
- 20 Water shows dust patterning in a particular direction (14)
- 23 Coaches daughter for a short time and withdraws (6)
- 24 Doctor complicated CEC's ouster by a foreign office employee (8)
- 25 Sailor with an intoxicating cigarette (6)
- 26 Daughter misplaced fruit after the Indian girl's entry and became emotionally troubled (8)

(set by Neyartha)

- 3 Could these be dropped in certain socially inferior circles? (7)
- 4 Layer found by Oscar, tucking into the wine from the south, on the globe (11)
- 6 Foreign office making the liberal leave the raucous assembly (7)
- 7 Mistrust making the cousins design an envelope for the Greek letter (9)
- 8 Inflexibility resulting from contraction after commencement (10)
- 12 Coarse carpet containing nickel protects upset Greek character in the emancipation process (11)
- 13 An Indian car model for the foreign office employee (10)
- 15 Bone turning up inside an ice-cream holder in a foreign office (9)
- 18 Rattle the peacekeepers with a turning device (7)
- 19 Vegetable concealed by Field Marshal Lothario (7)
- 21 Scheduled retreat's a fancy way to resign (5)
- 22 Nail on an upright member in a timber framework (4)

SUDOKU



Solution to puzzle 12861
S H R E W D E C S T A T I C
T E I F H U E A
A L M A N D I N E L E M O N
M O D N L I P U
P E R U S E D S A P I E N T
E S T E E S E
D U E T O R E A G E N T S
E D I E M A K E R T I M E R
A D O E A R A I
B R I G A D E C H A G R I N
U O R P T I N I
S A T I E L O N G A T E D
E I N R E E A A
D E C L A S S E A D D L E D

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku
5 2 8 9 4 3 7 1 6
1 7 3 2 6 8 9 4 5
9 6 4 5 7 1 8 2 3
6 5 1 3 2 7 4 9 8
4 3 2 8 1 9 6 5 7
7 8 9 6 5 4 2 3 1
8 4 7 1 9 5 3 6 2
3 1 6 4 8 2 5 7 9
2 9 5 7 3 6 1 8 4

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

FAITH

Aligning with dharma

The Ramayana illustrates the many facets of saranagati when people seek refuge in God for various purposes, from fulfilling worldly aims to that of attaining salvation. At first, the celestial beings along with Brahma seek Lord Narayana for help, unable to bear the atrocities of Ravana. The Lord then makes known His Sankalpa to take a human form to kill him. Others such as Ahalya, Guha, Bharata, the rishis of Dandakaranya, Kabandha, Sabharu, Sugriva, are shown to seek His grace through surrender. But Vibhishana's act of surrender at the feet of Rama is singled out as the most comprehensive explanation of the essence of saranagati by many learned scholars and interpreters, pointed out Damal Sri Ramakrishnan and Srimati Perundevi in a discourse.

It defines the bhava and attitude of the seeker and also the unequalled supremacy of the Lord as the sole refuge for the entire universe. Vibhishana of upright character is a dedicated younger brother; but at one stage, he is unable to accept the unjustness in Ravana's act of coveting Sita. When his warnings go unheeded, he knows that his next move is to seek the Lord. He knows very well what he is renouncing, namely, family and other possessions and also what he is seeking, the invaluable grace of God. Generally human beings are swayed by doubts owing to the power of maya and find it difficult to make the right choice. But the jivatma who receives God's grace is able to perceive the truth with clarity. Then, the noose binding one to the cycle of birth is loosened and there is no turning back. Like the calf that rushes to the mother cow when it is unleashed, Vibhishana too does not tarry and very quickly reaches the place where Rama and Lakshmana stay, which indicates the urgency of his strong leanings to align with dharma.