



Pelosi's rise heralds women's move to centre of US politics

AFP, Washington

With Democrat Nancy Pelosi leading her party's resounding takeover of the US House of Representatives, women have finally broken through the "marble ceiling" holding them back in US politics, feminist groups said.

Pelosi, who led the Democratic effort to wrest control of the House from President George W. Bush's Republicans, is expected to be named the new Speaker of the House, the first time in US history a woman has held the powerful job.

Her rise in the wake of the Democrat sweep in Tuesday's national elections spearheads a surge in the role of women in elected office, with now some 70 seats in the 435-member body.

Women remain a distinct minority in the House, largely dominated by white men.

But their election participation has surged to new highs, with some 140 joining the races for House seats in Tuesday's election, 98 of them with the Democrats.

Bush faces hurdles in Democratic Congress

AFP, Washington

In sweeping both chambers of Congress for the first time in 12 years, Democrats have handed US President George W Bush the biggest defeat of his political career and set the stage for a tumultuous two years ahead of the 2008 presidential election.

US news media reported late Wednesday that Democrats took the last undecided race for the Senate, in Virginia, completing a rout of Bush's Republicans with a 51-49 margin in the upper house, following a momentous 229-197 takeover in the lower House of Representatives, with nine seat still undecided.

Already ahead of the Virginia outcome, Bush implicitly acknowledged that the election was a referendum on his leadership and the Iraq war.

"As the head of the Republican Party, I share a large part of the responsibility," the US leader said at a press conference Wednesday.

"If you look at race by race, it was close. The cumulative effect, however, was not too close. It was a thumping," he said.

The decisive verdict could mean a major headache for the final two years of Bush's presidency if Democrats make good on their vow to use their new found power to hold hearings on the conduct of the war in Iraq, the slow response to devastating Hurricane Katrina last year, and other issues.

"The American people have spoken clearly and decisively in favour of Democrats leading this country in a new direction," Senate minority leader Harry Reid said in a statement after news that Democrats had seized the upper chamber.

"From changing course in Iraq

to raising the minimum wage to fixing the health care crisis to making this country energy independent, we're ready to get to work," Reid said.

While some Democrats have called for impeachment hearings over Bush's handling of Iraq, senior party official Rahm Emanuel said early Wednesday that the party would not try to impeach the president.

However, in control of the House of Representatives or the Senate, the Democrats would have the authority to hold hearings and investigations and to issue subpoenas compelling witnesses to testify, potentially embarrassing to the White House.

Besides taking the leadership of the two houses, Democrats will take over the powerful committees charged with reviewing and endorsing legislation, from the foreign relations to budget panels.

That will empower them to set the legislative agenda. However, they likely fall short of the votes to do anything on their own or overcome presidential vetoes, potentially leading to legislative stalemate.

Nevertheless, Democrats say they would quickly introduce long-stalled bills to raise the minimum wage for the first time in a decade, put new homeland security measures in place and control a runaway US budget deficit.

Democratic Representative Chris Van Hollen of Maryland said in a speech last month at Washington's National Press Club that changes would start "immediately" when the new Congress reconvenes on January 3.

"You will have a process where committees will actually do their job, bring witnesses before them, and ask them the tough questions in an open setting," Van Hollen said.

US ELECTIONS Asian-Americans make handsome gains

AFP, Washington

Asian-Americans scored critical victories in US legislative elections as they rode on the wave of a Democratic comeback and displayed political clout beyond traditional strongholds in California and Hawaii.

As victorious Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives and Senate in Tuesday's elections, the Asian-American community added another crucial seat in the House and expanded their influence in state legislatures.

Democrat Mazie Hirono, a Japanese-American former lieutenant governor, beat a state senator in Hawaii to become the seventh representative from the Asian-American community in the House of Representatives.

She will be the first Japan-born American to serve in the House.

Several other federal Asian-American lawmakers scored big victories to retain their seats, including sole senator from the community, Daniel Akaka, a Japanese-

American, in Hawaii.

Others included House lawmakers Chinese-American David Wu in Oregon as well as Japanese-Americans Michael Honda and Doris Matsui in California.

Bobby Jindal, who became the first Indian-American in 2004 to enter the House of Representatives, also retained his Republican seat with ease in Louisiana.

"This election underscores a new reality in American politics," said Toby Chaudhuri, spokesman for Campaign for America's Future, a think tank.

"Asian Americans can run for office and win -- not just in traditional Asian-American population centres like Hawaii and California, but in states like Ohio, Iowa, Texas and Kansas," he said.

Numbering 14 million, Asian-Americans make up only about four percent of the 300 million US population but their votes were seen critical in about 100 of the 435 congressional districts, said William Marumoto, president of the Asian-Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian women mourn as the body of one-year-old Rima and 17 other civilians arrive to their homes during their funeral procession in the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Hanun yesterday. Several thousand people turned out in Gaza to bury the victims of the Israeli strike that killed mostly women and children as the Jewish state braced for revenge suicide bombings threatened by Palestinian militants.

Palestinians for avenging Gaza killing

AFP, Beit Hanun

"Watch out Jews -- the army of Mohammed will return!" thundered mourners as thousands of Palestinians marched Thursday behind the funeral cortege of men, women and children killed by Israeli shelling the day before.

Vowing revenge with chants focusing on the seventh century battle of Khaybar, when the earliest Muslims defeated the Jews in what is now Saudi Arabia, angry Palestinians came from across Gaza to join the procession.

Seventeen corpses, spanning four generations of the Assamna family, were carried across the northern part of the territory before finally being laid to rest in Beit Hanun's newest cemetery.

Militants, who joined the procession of mourners, walked through the rubble of streets torn up during Israel's recent six-day reoccupation of the bleak town, shooting bursts of automatic machine gun fire heavenwards.

"Revenge, revenge, oh martyrs! Oh, our beloved, the response will be in Tel Aviv!" they cried, waving

flags of militant factions and periodically firing bursts of automatic gunfire into the air.

"From our soul, from our blood, we will die for you, our martyrs!" chanted the funeral procession as it wove its way through Beit Hanun where 18 civilians were killed by an Israeli artillery salvo at dawn Wednesday.

Carrying aloft the youngest victims, just toddlers, mourners marched through mud and raw sewage from shattered water pipes, a pungent reminder of the six-day occupation of Beit Hanun which only ended Tuesday.

The steel treads of tanks tore up asphalt streets, ripped up medians and knocked over light poles.

Two telephone-pole repairmen working high above the funeral march hurriedly lowered the arm of their cherry picker truck when a gunman's burst ripped past them. Women swarmed behind, crying frantically.

As they followed the corpses through the streets, the marchers walked first to the site of the shelling, then to the mosque and finally to the new graveyard in an empty field on the town's outskirts.

Indian airports put on high alert over threat letter

AFP, New Delhi

India declared a high security alert at several of its airports yesterday following the discovery of an anonymous letter threatening car bomb attacks by the al-Qaeda terror network, officials said.

Government officials said security had been tightened at six airports in the south, including Bangalore, after a security advisory was sent to most Indian airports.

"The high alert was sounded following the discovery of a threatening letter at a rubbish bin in Chennai airport," a home ministry official in New Delhi said.

"All necessary security measures have been put in place at all the airports to thwart any attack," said the official, who asked not to be named.

The measures included special checks just before embarkation, increased security around airports, additional baggage screenings and a "bit of passenger profiling," he said.

France tests ballistic missile for nuclear deployment

AFP, Paris

France yesterday successfully carried out a first test on its new M-51 ballistic missile, which is to carry submarine-based nuclear weapons, the defence ministry said.

The unarmed missile was fired over the Bay of Biscay from a launch test centre on France's southern Atlantic coast.

The M51, with a range of some 8,000 kilometres (5,000 miles), is to replace France's existing submarine-based missiles by 2010.

"This test flight was carried out ... in conformity with all France's international commitments concerning safety, transparency and non-proliferation," a ministry statement said.

Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie said that the test was needed "to check the performance of future missiles ... and to move to a new phase in the modernisation of our deterrent," according to the statement.



Mahathir in hospital after heart attack

AP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the architect of the country's modernisation, was hospitalised Thursday after suffering a mild heart attack, hospital officials and a relative said.

Mahathir, 81, was admitted to the government's National Heart Institute and was resting and receiving visits only from family members, the hospital said.

Mahathir's son Mirzan told The Associated Press that his father suffered mild pain on the left side of the chest early Thursday after he returned from a trip to New Zealand.