

Australia sets for hung parliament as voters punish PM

Axed PM
Rudd wins local seat

AFP, Sydney

AFP, Sydney

Australia faced its first hung parliament in 70 years yesterday after a furious voter backlash against Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who ousted an elected leader just eight weeks ago.

Gillard, who became the country's first woman prime minister in a sudden party coup, was lagging her conservative rivals in national elections with 70 seats to 72, public broadcaster ABC said as counting went deep into the night.

The Welsh-born redhead, 48, conceded her centre-left Labor party would not gain the 76 seats needed for an outright majority and would rely on the support of parliament's projected four independent MPs.

"The people have spoken, but it's going to take a little while to determine exactly what they have said," Gillard told supporters in Melbourne.

"What we know from tonight's result is there will be a number of independents in the house of representatives playing a role as the next government of Australia is formed," she added.

Analysts said Australia could be in limbo for up to two weeks as



PM Julia Gillard

Tony Abbott

parties horse-trade for leadership of the 150-seat lower house, after Gillard's Labor became the first single-term government since 1932.

"What is clear tonight is that the Labor Party has definitely lost its majority," opposition leader Tony

Abbott, of the conservative Liberal/National coalition, told cheering supporters in what smacked of a victory speech.

"I say, on this remarkable night in our political history, that the Liberal Party is back in business," he said at

the jubilant gathering in Sydney.

The events represent a significant reverse for Labor, which swept to power in 2007 under Kevin Rudd but enraged voters by dumping the prime minister in June, after his approval ratings slumped.

Gillard quickly called elections, hoping for a honeymoon with voters, but ran a chaotic, leak-plagued campaign, which failed to capitalise on Labor's big achievement of helping Australia avoid a recession during the financial crisis.

The stunning electoral upset that robbed Labor of its majority was "a referendum on the political execution of a prime minister" by Labor's factional leaders, Abbott told his supporters, while urging them not to be triumphalist.

Voters were also incensed by Labor's decision to shelve an emissions trading scheme, the centrepiece of its drive against climate change, after failing to push it through parliament.

"We shouldn't be on a knife-edge tonight and we shouldn't be losing colleagues all over the country," said Sydney's Maxine McKew, who lost Sydney's bellwether seat of Bennelong.

"Clearly you cannot have the

removal of a Labor leader and a prime minister, and then two months later have an election and not have that play into the outcome," she added.

Around 14 million electors took part in a mandatory vote for the lower house and half the 76-seat Senate.

Results showed voters turning on Labor in the battleground states of Queensland and New South Wales, but stronger support for the Greens, which favours the ruling party under Australia's complex preferences system.

Gillard, a former lawyer and "Ten Pound Pom" who was born in Wales, had pledged better education and healthcare and played up Labor's achievement in avoiding a recession during the financial crisis.

Abbott, a 52-year-old religious conservative who has doubts about mankind's role in climate change, targeted fears over illegal immigration and questioned Labor's spending record, as well as Gillard's knifing of Rudd.

Both sides targeted marginal seats in resource-rich Queensland -- Rudd's home state -- and western Sydney, where rapid population growth has put pressure on services and raised concerns about immigration.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Main three parties are contesting

14 million voters registered this year

Almost 1,200 candidates are vying for all 150 seats in the House of Representatives and 40 of the 76 seats in the Senate

Australian governments have changed only six times in the 25 elections held since World War II

Polls closed at 6pm (Australian time)

Iran fuels up first nuclear reactor

REUTERS, Bushehr

Iran began fuelling its first nuclear power plant on Saturday, a potent symbol of its growing regional sway and rejection of international sanctions designed to prevent it building a nuclear bomb.

Iranian television showed live pictures of Iran's nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi and his Russian counterpart watching a fuel rod assembly being prepared for insertion into the reactor near the Gulf city of Bushehr.

"Despite all the pressures, sanctions and hardships imposed by Western nations, we are now witnessing the start-up of the largest symbol of Iran's peaceful nuclear activities," Salehi told a news conference afterwards.

Iranian officials said it would take two to three months before the plant starts producing electricity and would generate 1,000 megawatts once it reaches full power.

Russia designed, built and will supply fuel for Bushehr, taking back spent rods, which could be used to

make weapons-grade plutonium in order to ease nuclear proliferation concerns.

Saturday's ceremony comes after decades of delays building the plant, work on which was initially started by German company Siemens in the 1970s, before Iran's Islamic Revolution.

The United States criticized Moscow earlier this year for pushing ahead with Bushehr given persistent Iranian defiance over its nuclear program.

Moscow supported a fourth UN Security Council resolution in June, which imposed new sanctions and called for Iran to stop uranium enrichment, which, some countries fear, could lead it to obtain nuclear weapons.

"The construction of the nuclear plant at Bushehr is a clear example showing that any country, if it abides by existing international legislation and provides effective, open interaction with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), should have the opportunity to access peaceful use of the

atom," Sergei Kiriyenko, head of Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom, told the news conference.

CONCERN

The fuelling of Bushehr is a milestone in Iran's path to harness technology, which it says will reduce consumption of its abundant fossil fuels, allowing it to export more oil and gas and to prepare for the day when the minerals riches dry up.

Many countries in the oil-rich Gulf region are planning to build nuclear power stations and the Bushehr start-up puts Iran ahead of its Arab rivals across the Gulf.

While most nuclear analysts say Bushehr does not add to any proliferation risk, many countries remain deeply concerned about Iran's uranium enrichment.

It disclosed the existence of a second enrichment plant only last year and announced in February it was enriching uranium to a level of 20 percent, from about 3.5 percent previously, taking it closer to weapons-grade levels and well above what is needed to fuel a power plant.



Head of the Russian nuclear agency Sergei Kiriyenko (R) and Iran's atomic chief Ali Akbar Salehi (L) attend a ceremony initiating the transfer of Russia-supplied fuel to the Bushehr nuclear power plant in southern Iran yesterday after more than three decades of delay.

PHOTO: AFP

WikiLeaks founder suspected of rape

AP, Stockholm

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is suspected of rape in Sweden, where authorities have issued a warrant for his arrest, officials said Saturday.

The 39-year-old Australian denied the allegations on WikiLeaks' Twitter page, saying they "are without basis and their issue at this moment is deeply disturbing."

Assange, who has sought Swedish legal protection for the whistle-blower website, is suspected of molestation and rape in two separate cases, said Karin Rosander, a spokeswoman for the Swedish Prosecution Authority.

"He should get in contact with police so that he can be confronted with the suspicions," Rosander told The Associated Press.

She said a prosecutor in Stockholm issued the arrest warrant on Friday. The move means police are ordered to seek his arrest as part of an investigation but doesn't necessarily mean that criminal charges will be filed.

"The next step is that we interrogate him," Rosander said. "Then we'll see what happens."

WikiLeaks has angered the Obama administration by publishing thousands of leaked documents about US military activities in Iraq and Afghanistan. Assange said Wednesday that WikiLeaks plans to release a new batch of 15,000 documents from the Afghan war within weeks.

He was in Sweden last week partly to apply for a publishing certificate to make sure the website, which has servers in Sweden, can take full advantage of Swedish laws protecting whistle-blowers.

He also spoke at a seminar hosted by the Christian faction of the opposition Social Democratic party and announced he would write bimonthly columns for a left-wing Swedish newspaper.

WikiLeaks commented on the rape allegations on its Twitter page. Apart from the comment from Assange, the page had a link to an article in Swedish tabloid Expressen, which first reported the allegations.

China seized 100 tons of tainted milk powder

REUTERS, Beijing

China has seized more than 100 tons of melamine-contaminated milk powder in its northern provinces, state media reported late Friday, the latest case of food safety problems in the world's most populous country.

A total of 103 tons of milk powder from four dairy brands in Hebei, Shanxi and Tianjin provinces were found to be laced with the industrial chemical melamine, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

Authorities have detained 41 suspects on the case.

In July, samples of milk powder found in northwestern provinces Gansu and Qinghai had levels of the chemical melamine up to 500 times beyond the permitted limit.

Israel, Palestine agree to direct ME peace talks

Jewish settlements 'may halt' negotiations

REUTERS, Washington/ Jerusalem

Israel and the Palestinians accepted on Friday an invitation by the United States and other powers to restart direct talks on September 2 in a modest step toward forging a deal within 12 months to create a Palestinian state and peacefully end one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will meet with President Barack Obama on September 1, before formally resuming direct negotiations the following day at the State Department in Washington.

"There have been difficulties in the past, there will be difficulties ahead," Hillary said in a statement.

Hillary added that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah also were invited to the talks, which will mark the first direct negotiations between Israel and the

Palestinians in 20 months.

"I ask the parties to persevere, to keep moving forward even through difficult times and to continue working to achieve a just and lasting peace in the region," Hillary said.

Hillary's announcement was echoed by the Quartet of Mideast peace mediators -- the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations --, which issued its own invitation to the talks and underscored that a deal could be reached within a year.

Netanyahu quickly accepted the US invitation and said reaching a deal would be possible but difficult.

"We are coming to the talks with a genuine desire to reach a peace agreement between the two peoples that will protect Israel's national security interests, foremost of which is security," a statement from his office said.

After a meeting in the West Bank city of Ramallah, the Palestinian leadership announced its acceptance of the invitation for face-to-face peace talks with Israel.

Egg recall in US goes up to half a billion

BBC ONLINE

Half a billion eggs in the US have been recalled in an investigation into a salmonella outbreak, which now includes two farms in the state of Iowa.

Iowa's Hillandale Farms announced it was recalling 170 million eggs after tests confirmed salmonella.

The news follows a recall of 380 million eggs by another Iowa farm earlier this week.

A spokeswoman for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said the two cases are linked.

Regulators said salmonella cases have increased threefold since May.

About 2,000 salmonella cases were reported between May and July, roughly 1,300 more than usual, the Centers for Disease Control said.



A file photo shows Dutch solo sailor Laura Dekker, 14, speaks to the press in the harbour of Brouwershaven on July 27, 2010. She began her round-the-world record bid from Portugal yesterday as a television company quoted her agent.

PHOTO: AFP

FLOOD AROUND THE WORLD

China evacuates 50,000; N Korea hit hard

AFP, Beijing

Heavy rains sparked serious flooding along the China-North Korea border Saturday, with more than 50,000 Chinese evacuated and Pyongyang's state media warning of "devastating" consequences in the North.

Downpours swelled the Yalu river which forms the border between the neighbouring countries to untenable levels, sending floodwaters into homes on both sides of the frontier, state media in both nations said.

In the northeast Chinese city of Dandong, three people were missing and more than 50,000 others evacuated, officials told AFP. About 230 homes collapsed and some transport, power and communication links have been cut off.

While an official at Dandong's flood control headquarters insisted that the situation was "not serious" in the city of 2.4 million, the Korean Central News Agency said the city of Sinuiju across the border had been "severely affected".

Floodwaters had inundated all houses, public buildings and farmland in three sectors of Sinuiju -- home to a North Korean military airbase -- and nearby rural communities, KCNA reported, without saying how many people were affected.

Provincial and local officials joined military personnel in rescue efforts, the North's media said.

In China, some roads were submerged along the Yalu and houses in Dandong were flooded with water that was knee-deep after heavy rain, which began early Friday, the official Xinhua news agency reported, citing the city government.

DIFFERENT bites

Moon is shrinking: Astronomers

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The moon is shrinking, but it will not be disappearing any time soon and its shrinkage will not affect the earth in any way, astronomers say.

Reporting on Thursday in the US journal Science, the astronomers said they had found previous undetected landforms which indicate that the earth's satellite has been shrinking but by only a tiny amount.

Relative to the moon's age, estimated at around 4.5 billion years, the contraction is recent, occurring less than a billion years ago, and is measured at about 100 metres.

Indonesian train now has women-only carriages

AP, Jakarta

As the train rattled into Indonesia's capital, 19-year-old Wiwit Wahyuningsih leaned back in a soft, pink-cushioned seat in a carriage newly designated exclusively for women.

It was a great feeling, the university student said, knowing she didn't have to worry about being ogled at, pinched or even groped.

"The trains are always so packed, there are thousands of people crammed up against one another," she said as she arrived at her station, books tucked beneath her arm. "Especially during morning and evening rush hours, it's very common to be harassed or touched by men, intentional or not."