



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (2nd L) and his wife Ri Sol Ju (L) pose with South Korean President Moon Jae-in (2nd R) and his wife Kim Jung-sook (R) on the top of Mount Paektu, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Abe to amend pacifist charter

Reelected as party leader, PM calls for a new Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Shinzo Abe yesterday vowed to press on with revising Japan's pacifist constitution after winning a historic third term as party head that set him on course to become the country's longest-serving premier.

The 63-year-old conservative secured 553 votes against 254 won by former defence minister Shigeru Ishiba, a hawkish self-confessed "military geek", in a two-horse race for leader of the Liberal Democratic Party.

"I will finally embark on constitutional revision, which has never been achieved in the 70 years since the end of the war, and start building a new nation as we look to the future," Abe told reporters after his victory.

He said his election had given him "strong support" to suggest changes to the text, which he would submit to parliament at the next session, expected to take place in the next few weeks.

The election win hands Abe three more years as party leader, giving him the chance of breaking the record for the nation's longest serving premiership held by Taro Katsura, a revered politician who served three times between 1901 and 1913.

To loud cheers of "banzai" -- the Japanese equivalent of "three cheers" -- from party members, a grinning Abe said: "The battle is over. Let's build a new Japan by joining hands and uniting."

Public support for Abe -- a political thoroughbred whose grandfather and father both held power -- has recovered after he managed to survive a series of cronyism and cover-up scandals.

Reconfirmed in power, Abe will head to New York this weekend to attend the UN General Assembly and hold a



summit with US President Donald Trump.

Nationalist Abe has frequently voiced his wish to rewrite the charter, imposed by the victorious US occupiers, which forces the country to "forever renounce war" and dictates that armed forces will "never be maintained".

Abe insists any changes would merely remove the country's well-equipped Self-Defense Forces from the constitutional paradox whereby they should not technically exist.

But any changes to the text would be hugely sensitive in pacifist Japan and almost certainly greeted with fury in China and the Koreans, 20th-century victims of Japanese military aggression.

Even if Abe manages to force a revision through parliament, he would face a referendum, raising the prospect of a Brexit-style political meltdown if the people vote against him, said Yu Uchiyama, political scientist from the University of Tokyo.

In addition, surveys show that tinkering with the legal text is far from top of most Japanese voters' to-do list, as the country faces an ageing and declining population and a still-sluggish economy.

Ex-PM hit with 25 new charges

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian prosecutors yesterday charged former Prime Minister Najib Razak with 21 counts of money laundering and four counts of abuse of power over hundreds of millions of dollars received in his personal bank account.

The charges bring the total number against Najib to 32 as investigators ramp up a probe into how billions went missing from scandal-plagued 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) - a state fund that he founded and chaired.

Najib has denied all charges, which have piled up since he unexpectedly lost a general election in May to Mahathir Mohamad, who reopened the 1MDB investigation.

Prosecutors, describing the abuse of power charges, said Najib used his position as prime minister, finance minister and chairman of 1MDB to obtain funds totalling about 2.3 billion ringgit (\$556.23 million) between 2011 and 2014.

The money-laundering charges describe how Najib



received 2.1 billion ringgit from Tanore Finance Corp, which U.S. authorities have said was used to siphon money from 1MDB.

"The charges made today will give me a chance to clear my name, that I am not a thief," Najib told reporters.

He was released after the judge set bail of 3.5 million ringgit (\$846,430), to be paid by Sept. 28.

Prosecutors said it was a matter of "national disgrace" for a head of state to be facing such charges.

"This is a case involving a man holding the highest elected office. And him, facing such serious charges, must face some consequences in the eyes of the court," lead prosecutor Gopal Sri Ram said, arguing for a bail amount of 5 million ringgit.

Najib has faced corruption allegations since the Wall Street Journal reported in 2015 that \$681 million was sent to a personal bank account of the then-prime minister in 2013. A year later, the U.S. Department of Justice confirmed the transaction and said the funds originated from 1MDB.

Najib has said the funds were donations from Saudi

Arabia, most of which he returned.

Despite growing calls to step down, he clung to power by cracking down on dissent and the media. But Malaysians voted him out earlier this year and he has since come under close scrutiny.

In recent months, prosecutors brought a total of seven charges against Najib over 42 million ringgit that allegedly flowed from SRC International, a former 1MDB unit, into his bank account.

The Department of Justice has said a total of \$4.5 billion was stolen from 1MDB through a complex web of transactions and fraudulent shell companies. Malaysian financier Low Taek Jho is described as a central figure in the scandal.

Azam Baki, the deputy commissioner of the anti-graft agency, said more charges could be brought against individuals.

When asked if Najib's wife, Rosmah Mansor, could face charges, he said: "I'm not denying that." Rosmah was questioned by investigators earlier this year and has been barred from leaving the country.

Najib's lawyer, Muhammad Shafee Abdullah, described the charges against his client as "bizarre".

"Can you be accused of money laundering for returning funds? It doesn't make sense," he said.

Shafee himself was charged with money laundering last week after allegedly receiving 9.5 million ringgit from Najib.

Both Malaysian and U.S. authorities have described how Najib returned most of the money he received to the Tanore account he originally received the money from.

However, U.S. authorities have said Tanore was controlled by an associate of Low and held funds diverted from 1MDB.

1MDB SCANDAL IN MALAYSIA

Najib charged with 21 counts of money laundering

Prosecutors also bring four abuse of power charges against Najib

Former PM pleads not guilty to all charges, vows to prove innocence



Anwar set for political return next month

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's leader-in-waiting Anwar Ibrahim will seek to return to frontline politics by contesting a local election to become a lawmaker next month, officials said yesterday, a key step on his journey from prison to the premiership.

Anwar, whose alliance won a shock election victory in May, is expected to easily win the October 13 poll which was triggered after an MP quit parliament to open up a seat for the veteran politician.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, 93, has pledged to step aside within two years to hand power to Anwar, his former nemesis with whom he teamed up to oust scandal-plagued Najib Razak and his long-ruling coalition at the election.

Following the poll, Anwar, 71, received a royal pardon to allow his release from prison where he was serving a sentence for breaking laws against sodomy in a case that his supporters said was politically motivated.

He needs to be elected to parliament to qualify to succeed Mahathir. Danyal Balagopal Abdullah from his People's Justice Party quit parliament last week to open up a spot for him.

Once tipped as Mahathir's successor in the 1990s, ex-deputy premier Anwar fell out bitterly with his former boss, leading to his jailing on charges of sodomy and corruption in 1999. He was released but later jailed again for sodomy in 2015 during Najib's rule.

Anwar forged an unexpected alliance with Mahathir to challenge the then-ruling Barisan Nasional coalition after Najib became embroiled in a scandal surrounding state fund 1MDB.

Ibrahim Suffian, who heads independent polling firm Merdeka Centre, told AFP that Anwar would likely win the poll race easily. He added that he believed Mahathir would likely keep to the power handover deal, "so long as the goodwill between him and Anwar remains".

BATTLING ELECTION MEDDLING

Facebook building a 'war room'

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook on Wednesday said it will have a "war room" up and running on its Silicon Valley campus to quickly repel efforts to use the social network to meddle in upcoming elections.

"We are setting up a war room in Menlo Park for the Brazil and US elections," Facebook elections and civic engagement director Samidh Chakrabarti said during a conference call.

"It is going to serve as a command center so we can make real-time decisions as needed."

He declined to say when the "war room" -- currently a conference room with a paper sign taped to the door -- would be in operation.

Teams at Facebook have been honing responses to potential scenarios such as floods of bogus news or campaigns to trick people into falsely thinking they can cast ballots by text message, according to executives.

The conference call was the latest briefing by Facebook regarding efforts to prevent the kinds of voter manipulation or outright deception that took place ahead of the 2016 election that brought US President Donald Trump to office.

Facebook is better prepared to defend against efforts to manipulate the platform to influence elections and has recently thwarted foreign influence campaigns targeting several countries, chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said last week in a post on the social network.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (C) walks with (L-R) Finland's Prime Minister Juha Sipila, Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Denmark's Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen and Belgium's Prime Minister Charles Michel, on their way to pose for a family photo at the Mozarteum University during the EU Informal Summit of Heads of State or Government in Salzburg, Austria, yesterday.

Special Brexit summit in November

'EU backs second referendum'

AFP, Salzburg

European Union leaders meeting in Salzburg have agreed to a special summit in November to finalise a Brexit deal with Britain, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said yesterday.

"There will indeed be a special summit in November, and the states and heads of government will support that," he told reporters in the Austrian city.

Brussels originally said it wanted an agreement on Britain's withdrawal from the European Union by a formal EU summit in October.

But after months of deadlock in the talks, EU President Donald Tusk had proposed an extraordinary summit in mid-November to clinch the deal.

British Prime Minister Theresa May attended the talks in Salzburg but will leave the other 27 EU leaders yesterday at lunch-time while they plan their approach to the final stage of negotiations.

Meanwhile, Malta's prime minister yesterday signalled unexpected support from EU leaders for a second referendum on Brexit in Britain, boosting a growing campaign for a new poll despite the British government's trenchant opposition.

Speaking to BBC radio on the sidelines of an informal European Union summit in Salzburg, Joseph Muscat said there was "almost unanimous" backing among its leaders for a vote.

"We would like the almost impossible to happen, that the UK has another referendum," Muscat said.

"I think most of us would welcome a situation where there is the possibility of the British people putting things into perspective, seeing what has been negotiated, seeing the options, and then deciding once and for all."

EU Council President Donald Tusk has previously said "our door remains open" if Britain changes its mind about leaving the bloc.

May reiterated her position in a speech to EU leaders in Salzburg on Wednesday. She said second Brexit referendum is not an option.

Assad blames Israel over downing of Russia plane

Israeli air force chief heads to Moscow to brief on incident

AFP, Damascus

President Bashar al-Assad has blamed Israel for the downing of a Russian plane, which was accidentally hit by Syrian anti-aircraft fire during an Israeli missile strike.

"This unfortunate incident was the result of Israeli arrogance and depravity," the Syrian leader said, offering his condolences in a letter to his Russian counterpart for the death of 15 Russian crew members killed in the incident over Syria on Monday.

"We are determined that such tragic events will sway neither you nor us from continuing the fight against terrorism," he continued in the letter published by the official Sana agency.

The Russian plane was downed by Syria's Russian-made S-200 air defence system and all aboard were killed.

The Russian military has accused Israeli pilots of using the Russian plane as a cover,

"exposing it to fire from Syrian air defences".

Israel said it had targeted a Syrian military facility where weapons manufacturing systems were "about to be transferred on behalf of Iran" to Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah.

Russian President Vladimir Putin described the incident as the result of "tragic accidental circumstances," warning Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against carrying out such operations in the future and pledging to beef up security for Russian forces in Syria.

Netanyahu on Tuesday expressed his "sorrow" to Putin in a phone call, offering to assist Moscow in the investigation.

Israel's air force commander was set to lead a delegation to Moscow yesterday to share the military's findings on the incident.

Hezbollah says it has 'precision missiles'

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon's Hezbollah yesterday said it had acquired "precision missiles" despite extensive efforts by neighbour and foe Israel to prevent the Shiite movement developing this capability.

"It has been done. The resistance now owns precision missiles" as part of its weaponry, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah said in a televised address during the key Shiite commemoration of Ashura.

Israel this month acknowledged carrying out more than 200 strikes over the past 18 months in war-torn Syria, where Hezbollah fights alongside Israel's arch-foe and Shiite powerhouse Iran in support of the Damascus regime.

Israel has said it is working to stop both Iran and Hezbollah from acquiring sophisticated arms.

"Attempts in Syria to block the way towards this (missile) capability" have failed, Nasrallah said.

"If Israel imposes a war on Lebanon, it will face a fate that it never would have expected."

Israel has fought several conflicts against Hezbollah, the last in 2006.

The Israeli military believes Hezbollah has between 100,000 and 120,000 short-range missiles and rockets, as well as several hundred longer-range missiles.

Nasrallah accused the Israelis of trying to kill him "day and night". He has lived in a secret location for decades and rarely appears in public.

'Pray or get a new job' Indonesian city orders top staff

AFP, Jakarta

An Indonesian city has ordered its top civil servants to visit their local mosque for dawn prayers or risk being sacked, underscoring the growing influence of religion across the world's biggest Muslim majority country.

Senior bureaucrats in Palembang, co-host of last month's Asian Games, are now required to visit their local mosque at the crack of dawn -- and they've been warned that a smartphone app was in the works to sniff out the less-than-devout.

The order, which may be a first for Indonesia, is aimed at helping bureaucrats better relate to residents' concerns while the early wake-up call could also boost productivity, city spokesman Amiruddin Sandy told AFP.

"By praying together at dawn with regular people, we get a chance to hear from them directly," he said, adding that common complaints ranged from water not running to broken street lights.

The edict comes as Indonesian society's lurch toward religious conservatism has challenged its long-held reputation for having a tolerant brand of Islam.

Religious and sexual minorities have been subject to increasing prejudice from authorities whipping gay people in conservative Aceh province to Christian congregations being targeted by suicide bombers earlier this year.

Palembang's new rule, which started Wednesday, applies to Muslim members of its 16,000-strong civil service although only 1,100 senior staff will risk a sacking if they skip dawn prayers.

The city's mayor plans to do some spot checking to make sure officials were complying until the local government launches a smartphone app to keep track of attendance, Sandy said.