

# Small parties back junta chief to stay in power

## Opposition accuses EC of rigging voting system

Eleven small Thai parties that each gained a parliamentary seat after a disputed electoral rule change will back the main pro-army party, leaders said yesterday, giving the ruling junta chief who launched a 2014 coup enough votes to stay in power.

Uttama said the party was still working to court other parties to form a majority in the House.

However, it will still take weeks before a new government can be formed, because the junta has not finished appointing the 250-seat Senate that will vote, along with the elected House of Representatives, to choose the prime minister.

But the 11 votes of the small parties are likely to ensure Prayuth is the next prime minister.

His Palang Pracharat, which won 115 seats in the House, needs 126 to get to the 376 majority required in the combined House-Senate vote to approve the prime minister, assuming the junta-appointed Senate backs Prayuth as expected.

The Democratic Front of seven parties opposed to extension of military dominance in government won 245 seats.

Initial results of the March 24 vote show the Democratic Front, led by the Pheu Thai party loyal to ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, expected to get 255 seats in the 500-seat elected House.

### THAILAND POLLS

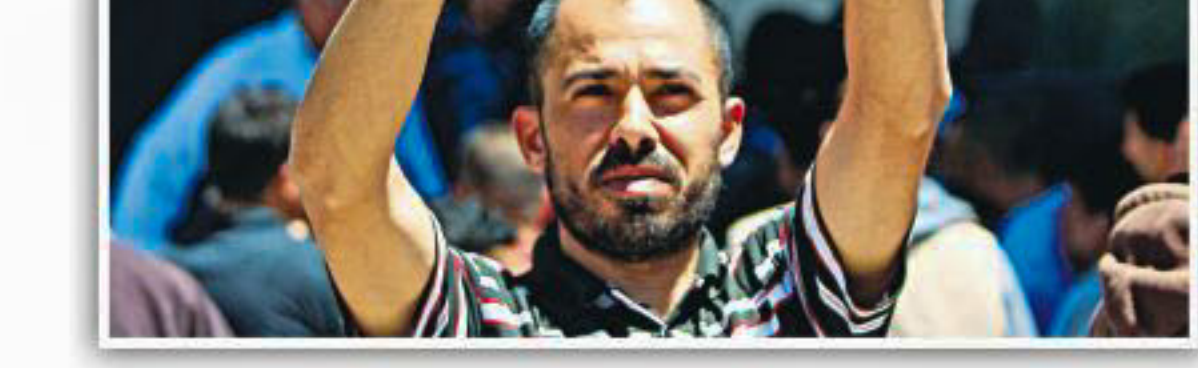


The move came after the opposition Democratic Front accused the Commission of rigging the system to ensure a win for former army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha in the first election since the military seized power from an elected government.

Ponlamuang Thai Party leader Sampan Lertnuwat said his party and 10 more would join a coalition with Palang Pracharat, the party led by junta loyalists that nominated Prayuth as its prime ministerial candidate.

"After discussing among ourselves, we 11 members of parliament intend to raise our hands in support of Prayuth Chan-ocha," Sampan told a news briefing.

"We also support Palang Pracharat to lead the formation of the next government," Palang Pracharat leader Uttama Savanayana appeared at the briefing to



Palestinians stand in a queue outside the post office to receive cash aid, part of \$480 million in aid allocated by Qatar, in Gaza City yesterday. Inset, a Palestinian man displays a 100 dollar bill. Gas-rich Qatar is a major aid donor to the Palestinians, both to Abbas's West Bank-based Palestinian Authority and to the rival Gaza administration of Islamist group Hamas.

PHOTO: AFP

# Sweden reopens Assange rape probe

## WikiLeaks welcomes the move

AFP, Stockholm

Swedish prosecutors said yesterday they were reopening a 2010 rape investigation against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, hoping to bring him to justice before the statute of limitations expires in August 2020.

The 47-year-old has claimed the Swedish allegations were a pretext to transfer him to the United States, where he fears prosecution over the release by WikiLeaks of millions of classified documents.

"I have today decided to reopen the investigation... There is still probable cause to suspect that Mr Assange committed rape," the deputy director of public prosecutions, Eva-Marie Persson, told reporters.

"The previous decision (in May 2017) to close the investigation was not based on difficulties related to evidence, but on difficulties that blocked the investigation."

WikiLeaks's editor, Kristinn Hrafnsson, said the reopening of the investigation would give him "a chance to clear his name."

The Australian whistleblower, who holed himself up in the Ecuadoran embassy in London for seven years to avoid a British extradition order to Sweden, was arrested on April 11 after Ecuador gave him up.

A London court sentenced him on May 1 to 50 weeks in jail for breaching the British order.

Now that Assange has left Ecuador's embassy, "I am of the opinion that the conditions are in place once again to pursue the case," the prosecutor said.

# EU supports Iran nuke deal

## Says bloc's foreign policy chief, stresses need for dialogue to avoid escalation; Saudi oil tankers sabotaged in the Gulf; Iran calls for probe

AGENCIES

The European Union's diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini said yesterday they would continue to support the nuclear pact because Iran continued to comply with inspections.

She stressed the need for dialogue as "the only and the best way to address differences and avoid escalation" in the region, as she arrived for a scheduled meeting of the bloc's foreign ministers in Brussels.

"We continue to fully support the nuclear deal with Iran, its full implementation," Mogherini said.

"It has been and continues to be for us a key element of the non-proliferation architecture both globally and in the region."

Alongside the meeting of all 28 foreign ministers, the representatives of Britain, France and Germany -- the three European signatories -- will meet Mogherini to discuss how to keep the deal going.

"We in Europe agree that this agreement is necessary for our security. No-one wants Iran to come into possession of a nuclear bomb," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said as he arrived.

"That is why we will continue to support the implementation of this agreement."

Amid US-Iran tensions regarding nuclear pact, two Saudi oil tankers were damaged in mysterious "sabotage attacks" in the Gulf.

Tehran called for an investigation into the "alarming" attacks and warned of "adventurism" by foreign players to disrupt



British FM Hunt warns US-Iran conflict risk

British Council staffer sentenced to 10 years for 'spying': Iran

maritime security, reported AFP. Britain warned of the danger of conflict erupting "by accident" in the Gulf. Britain's Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt yesterday said Iran and the United States could trigger a conflict by accident in an already unstable Gulf region, urging a period of calm ahead of talks between the European Union and US Secretary of State

Mike Pompeo. President Donald Trump is seeking to isolate Tehran by cutting off its oil exports after pulling out of a 2015 deal aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear programme. Trump has also sent US warplanes and an aircraft carrier to the Gulf.

Iran says the strategy amounts to "psychological warfare" and a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander on Sunday said Iran would retaliate to any aggressive US moves, reported Reuters.

Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 Iran deal, which aims to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons, is strongly opposed by Britain, France and Germany, the European signatories to the accord, which the EU helped to negotiate.

Meanwhile, an Iranian woman employee of the British Council has been sentenced to 10 years in prison for "spying", the judiciary's news website Mizan Online reported yesterday, sparking concern in London.

"An Iranian citizen in charge of the Iran desk at the... British Council was cooperating with English spying agencies," Mizan reported, quoting judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaili.

## NEWS IN brief

### Clashes in northwest Syria kill 35 fighters

AFP, Beirut

Clashes on the edge of a jihadist bastion in northwestern Syria have killed 35 fighters in 24 hours, a monitor said yesterday, after regime bombardment on the region devastated health services. The northwestern region has come under increasing fire by the regime and its ally Russia in recent weeks, despite a months-old buffer zone deal intended to shield it from any government offensive.

### NZ begins inquiry into Christchurch's massacre

AFP, Wellington

A judicial inquiry into whether New Zealand's police and intelligence services could have prevented the Christchurch mosque attacks in which 51 worshippers died began taking evidence yesterday. The royal commission will examine events leading up to the March 15 attack in which a lone gunman opened fire on two mosques in a mass shooting.

### Israel says site found for 'Trump' settlement

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday that a site for a promised new settlement to be named after US President Donald Trump had been chosen and formal approval was under way. "I promised that we would establish a community named after President Trump," Netanyahu said at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting.

### CATHOLIC MASS IN BURKINA FASO

## Gunmen kill six, set fire to church

AFP, Ouagadougou

Gunmen killed a priest and five parishioners during mass Sunday in an attack on a Catholic church in Dablo, northern Burkina Faso, security sources and a local official said.

"Towards 9:00 am, during mass, armed individuals burst into the Catholic church," Dablo mayor Ousmane Zongo told AFP. "They started firing as the congregation tried to flee."

The attackers -- between 20 and 30 according to a security source -- managed to trap some of the worshippers, Zongo added. "They killed five of them. The priest, who was celebrating mass, was also killed."

The gunmen then set fire to the church, several shops and a small cafe before heading to the local health centre, which they looted, burning the chief nurse's vehicle.

"There is an atmosphere of panic in the town," said Zongo. "People are holed up in their homes. Nothing is going on. The shops and stores are closed. It's practically a ghost town," he added.



Kashmiri protesters stand on a road amid tear smoke during clashes with Indian government forces at Mirgund Pattan on the outskirts of Srinagar yesterday, as protesters called for justice in the case of the alleged rape of a three-year-old girl.

PHOTO: AFP

# 'No laughing matter'

## India's Modi mocked for tech gaffes

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been roundly mocked for suggesting that radars are affected by clouds and boasting that he sent an email attachment years before the technology to do so was invented.

Modi, who is currently fighting to retain his premiership in a marathon election, claimed in a weekend television interview that he ordered air strikes on Pakistan in February because cloud cover would stop radar detection of Indian fighter jets.

"I said there is so much cloud and rain. There is a benefit," Modi told News Nation in the interview, recounting the bombardment of what India claims was a militant training camp across the Pakistani border.

"(I thought) the clouds can benefit us too. We can escape the radar... Ultimately I said there are clouds, let's go," he added.

Modi has been using the air strikes during the country's election campaign to bolster his strongest image.

quoted experts rubbish Modi's claims, with the Kolkata-based Telegraph ridiculing the prime minister for his "shock and awe" disclosure. Opposition politicians also piled in to taunt the 68-year-old.

"It seems no one clarified (to) the PM how radars work," tweeted Salman Soz, a senior member of the opposition Congress party.

"If that is the case, it is a very serious national security issue. No laughing matter!"

Social media jibes came thick and fast. One widely-shared internet meme featured a still from the blockbuster "Avengers" film franchise with Modi superimposed among the superheroes.

Twitter users also had a field day over Modi's claim that he sent digital pictures as an email attachment in the late 1980s.

"I am likely the first person to use digital camera in India in 1987 or 88. Only a few people had emails then," Modi had said in the same interview.



# Lanka under night curfew after anti-Muslim riots

## Bans FB, WhatsApp; PM urges all not to believe rumours

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka imposed a nationwide night curfew yesterday, after anti-Muslim riots spread to at least three districts just north of the capital in a violent new backlash against the Easter suicide bombings.

Official sources said the curfew was aimed at preventing a further escalation of violence, but police would not say why it had been extended across the country of 21 million people.

Initially, the districts of Puttalam, Kurunegala and Gampaha, near Colombo, were told to stay indoors after Christian-led mobs attacked several Muslim-owned businesses and mosques on Sunday and yesterday.

"The curfew in the three districts will be lifted at 6:00 am on Tuesday while in the rest of the country, a curfew will be imposed from 9:00 pm (1530 GMT) till 4:00 am (2130 GMT)," police said in a statement.

Police said there were sporadic incidents of mobs pelting stones and torching motorcycles and

cars owned by Muslims. In the town of Hettipola, at least three shops were torched.

Police and troops fought off hundreds of rioters in at least six towns earlier yesterday with teargas.

"Several shops have been attacked," a senior police officer told AFP. "When mobs tried to attack mosques, we fired in the air and used tear gas to disperse them."

"There is a strong political element to the riots today. There are people trying to make political capital out of this situation."

There were no immediate reports of casualties or arrests, police said.

Earlier, authorities banned Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media platforms after overnight riots gripped several towns in the region including Chilaw.



Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe urged the public not to believe rumours and warned that civil unrest will stretch the already thinly deployed security forces.

## Millions vote in Philippine elections crucial to Duterte

AFP, Manila

Filipinos headed to the polls yesterday in a vote that is expected to strengthen President Rodrigo Duterte's grip on power, opening the way for him to deliver on pledges to restore the death penalty and rewrite the constitution. More than 18,000 positions are at stake, including half of the seats in the upper house Senate, which has served as a bulwark against some of Duterte's most controversial policies. Duterte is known internationally for his foul-mouthed tirades and deadly drug war, but remains hugely popular among Filipinos fed up with the country's general dysfunction and leaders who have failed to fix it. He wants to bring back capital punishment for drug-related crimes as part of his narcotics crackdown, in which thousands of alleged pushers and users have already been killed by police. His tough-on-crime platform -- which also includes lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 15 to 12 -- was key to his landslide election victory in 2016.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS