

Belarus polls under scrutiny as strongman reaches out to West

AFP, Minsk

Belarusians yesterday voted in parliamentary polls with critics already condemning the election as fraudulent despite strongman President Alexander Lukashenko's efforts to reach out to the West.

Lukashenko -- who has been dubbed "Europe's last dictator" -- has ruled the ex-Soviet nation since 1994 and overseen a series of elections that international observers have deemed unfair.

Voters were yesterday electing the 110 MPs of the House of Representatives, the lower chamber in what the opposition calls a rubber-stamp parliament.

Those critical of Lukashenko faced little choice at the ballot box, with the main opposition leaders and the only two current opposition MPs barred from standing.

"The elections have been reduced to a ritual, just like in the USSR," Ales Bialiatski, head of rights group Vysna, said in a statement.

Akaksej Janukevich, deputy head of the Belarus National Front opposition party, told AFP he believed the authorities had chosen "the familiar scenario of falsifications".

According to official figures, more than 35 percent of the 6.8 million electorate had voted ahead of polling day through absentee ballots. A further two percent voted in the first hour after polls opened at 8am.

Madrasa student

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According to DPE statistics, 2,950,764 students sat for PECE in 2015 and 2,553,267 sat in 2018.

On the other hand, 306,196 student sat for Ebtedayee exam in 2015 and 350,371 sat in 2018.

This year, PECE exam had its lowest number of candidates in the last eight years whereas Ebtedayee exam had the highest in the last nine years.

PECE was introduced in 2009 while Ebtedayee exam in 2010.

Recent trend shows that not only the high-income section but also the middle-income people in urban areas opt to send their children to English-medium schools, said DPE sources.

Both the number of English-medium schools and their students have been on the rise in recent time, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics.

There were 53,000 students at 78 registered English-medium schools in 2013. The number of students rose to 80,511 and the number of schools to 147 in 2018.

However, sources said there were about 350 such schools in the country and many were not registered.

"We have seen that number of students at masjid-based primary education is increasing and they are going to Ebtedayee madrasas. It was prime reason of decreasing candidates at primary schools," said Bangladesh Prathomik Shikkhak Oikya Parishad Member Secretary Samsuddin Masud.

Bangladesh Swatantra Ebtedayee Madrasa Shikkhak Oikya Parishad Secretary General Shamsul Alam said that students from 2000 independent madrasas participated in Ebtedayee exam in 2010.

The number of madrasas were 4000 this year, he said. However, he could not provide the number of this year's Ebtedayee candidates immediately.

"In the recent years, we also noticed that many students of Qawmi madrasas are enrolling at Ebtedayee madrasas to take part in PECE and other exams. This could be a reason behind the rise," Shamsul said.

The exact number of students in Qawmi madrasas is not available as these institutions are not registered with any government agency.

Asked, Secretary Akram said some of the urban guardian could prefer English-medium schools.

"I will take steps to know the reason of whether students are shifting to English-medium schools."

2 Rohingyas

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attacked the team in Ghumdhum area in the upazila, leaving two BGB jawans injured.

Following information that Rohingya men and other members of the drug gang were in Tumbru Notun Bridge area, a BGB team went there around 3:00am, said Lt Col Ali Haider Azad Ahmed, commander of 34 Battalion.

Sensing their presence, the gang started shooting at the team forcing them to retaliate, he said, adding that the bullet-hit body of Yasin and Hossain were found on the ground after the "gunfight".

They were taken to Ukhia Health Complex where doctors declared them dead on arrival.

BGB officials claimed to have recovered firearms and 40,000 yaba pills from the spot.

The BGB commander said the gang had around 45 Rohingya men.



Demonstrators clash with riot police during a protest against the government in Santiago on Saturday. Protests continue in Chile despite government promise that it will hold a referendum to replace the country's dictatorship-era constitution -- a key demand of protesters after nearly a month of violent civil unrest.

PHOTO: AFP

Strikes resume in Iraq to bolster anti-regime protests

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqis flooded the streets of the capital and southern cities on Sunday in a general strike that bolstered the weeks-long movement demanding a government overhaul.

Sit-ins have become the go-to tactic for the rallies that erupted in early October in rage over corruption, a lack of jobs and an out-of-touch political class.

They have resisted efforts by security forces to snuff them out and on Sunday, thousands came out across the country after activists called for a general strike.

In the southern hotspots of Kut, Najaf, Diwaniyah and Nasiriyah, schools and government offices were shut as swelling crowds hit the streets.

Protesters cut roads in the oil-rich port city of Basra by burning tyres and in Hillah, south of Baghdad, students and other activists massed in front of the provincial headquarters.

"We'll keep up our protest and general strike with all Iraqis until we force the government to resign," said Hassan al-Tufan, a lawyer and activist.

In Baghdad hundreds of students skipped class to gather in Tahrir (Liberation) Square, the beating heart of the protest movement.

"No politics, no parties, this is a student awakening!" read one banner carried by young Iraqis with rucksacks.

They waved the Iraqi tricolour, marching north from Tahrir to the nearby Khallani Square.

Security forces had pulled back from their positions along that street early Saturday and demonstrators spilled out into those neighbourhoods and onto the nearby Al-Sinek bridge.

They immediately set up tents on a first segment of the bridge, facing off against riot police stationed behind two layers of thick concrete blast walls.

Just beyond those barriers was the embassy of neighbouring Iran, which protesters have criticised for propping up the government they want to bring down.

"We students are here to help the other protesters, and we won't retreat a single step," said a teenager wearing thick black-framed glasses.

Speaking anonymously because he

said he had been threatened for his involvement in the anti-government movement, he said hundreds of teenagers had skipped class.

Nearby, a volunteer medic in plastic surgeon's gloves urged labourers across Iraq to join the strike.

"Everyone should have a time set aside to take part in the protest," he said.

The government has proposed a laundry list of reforms in recent weeks but demonstrators have brushed them off as too little, too late in a country ranked the 12th most corrupt in the world by Transparency International.

"These steps, these reforms are just an opiate for the masses. Nothing more, nothing less," another protester said on Sunday.

Pointing across the river to the area where parliament, the premier's office and other key buildings are, he insisted the protesters wanted "new faces."

"There are so many capable young people in Iraq who are deprived -- and unfortunately those are the guys that rule us," he said.

Gotabaya wins Sri Lanka polls

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declared the hands-down winner with 52.25 percent of the vote.

"It is my duty to serve all Sri Lankans without race or religious discrimination," he said. "I promise to discharge my duties in a fair manner."

Election results showed minority Tamil and Muslim communities voting overwhelmingly for the ruling party candidate Sajith Premadasa who came a distant second with 41.99 percent.

Mahinda Rajapaksa, with Gotabaya -- nicknamed "Terminator" by his own family -- effectively running the security forces, ended a 37-year civil war with Tamil separatists.

His decade in power was also marked by alleged rights abuses, murky extra-judicial killings and closer ties with China.

"I didn't sleep all night," said student Devni, 22, one of around 30 people who gathered outside Rajapaksa's Colombo residence. "I am so excited, he is the president we need."

Premadasa, 52, of the ruling party, conceded the race and congratulated Rajapaksa and urged him to implement his manifesto promising tax cuts, free food rations and subsidies to farmers.

Rajapaksa is due to be sworn in today at the ancient north-central Buddhist pilgrim city of Anuradhapura. Turnout in Saturday's vote was 83.7 percent.

Saturday's poll was the first popularity test of the United National Party (UNP) government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe who is under pressure from his cabinet colleagues to step down.

Wickremesinghe's administration failed to prevent the April attacks despite prior and detailed intelligence warnings from India, according to a parliamentary investigation.

Yesterday three cabinet members resigned -- including Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera.

Premadasa is the son of assassinated ex-president Ranasinghe Premadasa who fell victim to a Tamil rebel suicide bomber in May 1993.

But Gotabaya is adored by the Sinhalese majority and the powerful Buddhist clergy for how he and Mahinda ended the war in 2009, when 40,000 Tamil civilians allegedly perished at the hands of the army.

Under his brother, Gotabaya was defence secretary and effectively ran the security forces, allegedly overseeing "death squads" that bumped off rivals, journalists and others. He denies the allegations.

This makes the brothers detested and feared among many Tamils, who make up 15 percent of the population. Some in the Muslim community -- who make up 10 percent -- are also fearful of Gotabaya, having faced days of mob violence in the wake of the April attacks.

Under Mahinda, Sri Lanka also borrowed heavily from China for infrastructure projects and even allowed two Chinese submarines to dock in Colombo in 2014, alarming Western countries as well as India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday tweeted that India looked forward to "deepening the close and fraternal ties... and for peace, prosperity as well as security in our region".

Floating cities!

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in which there are "platforms inside the city where humans can unire themselves from their daily restraints."

The architect's visions of untethered spaces hovering over city streets might seem far-fetched, but he believes in them.

"When you realize the possibilities truly believe it is not so far away," he says. "This is not science-fiction."

Kachaamby first conceived of floating architecture as a student in Japan 13 years ago, and the quest has become increasingly serious. For the past five years he has been steadily increasing the size of his models.

"When I started generating prototypes it was in miniature dimensions almost 10 centimeters

long," he recalls. "Now the current prototype is almost two meters long -- so the next one will definitely be bigger."

The professor has experimented with different technologies for his floating models.

The current system makes use of magnetic levitation -- sometimes shortened to "maglev" in its application with frictionless, high-speed trains -- that works by lifting an object through the force of two opposed magnets.

Kachaamby uses 3D-printed, ultra-light plastic material for the prototypes, to maximize the size of the object the magnetic force can lift.

"You have to find an equilibrium between the weight of architecture

and the strength of technology," he says. "Then you can achieve greater heights and more impressive prototypes."

The potential benefits of levitating architecture are many and varied.

Transcending space constraints could allow for more efficient planning, with less land required for construction, and less pressure on green spaces that could be preserved or expanded.

Floating architecture could also build resilience to natural disasters such as earthquakes and flooding.

Kachaamby says he has a roadmap to creating ever larger and higher prototypes, all the way up to full-size model, which he hopes to achieve in his lifetime.

Cyprus police say they seized Israeli 'spy van', question owner

AFP, Larnaca

Cypriot police said Saturday they had seized an alleged "spy van" equipped with sophisticated surveillance equipment capable of hacking communications and questioned its Israeli owner.

Police began investigating after the opposition communist party AKEL asked what the government was doing about activities undertaken in the van, which was showcased in a Forbes video story broadcast several months ago that only recently went viral in Cyprus.

Cypriot police chief Kypros Michaelides told private radio station Astra that the Israeli owner had given "some explanations", but he would be questioned further, along with Cypriot nationals.

Forbes had named the owner of the van as ex-Israeli intelligence officer Tal Dilian, who allegedly heads a Cyprus-registered company that owns the

vehicle.

It said the \$9 million state-of-the-art equipment in the van can monitor electronic devices within a 500-metre (yards) radius, hack any phone and listen in to conversations regardless of the level of encryption.

Investigators searched a company premises where the van was located in the southern coastal resort of Larnaca after securing warrants, Cypriot police said.

"On preliminary examination, the vehicle was found to have electronic equipment and was confiscated, along with other evidence," a police statement said Saturday.

"In a subsequent investigation at the company's offices, further evidence was found, which will be subject to scientific examination," it added.

Police said they were investigating possible violations of the protection of privacy law.

ACC wants

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He also said the CAG office and the ACC could explore the formation of a joint taskforce to work at both the pre and post phases of auditing certain corruption-prone departments and offices. This could them help take prompt action against any possible corrupt practices.

Iqbal said the CAG office and ACC could jointly undertake risk assessments in public procurement and public expenditure, preferably for mega projects.

He said the public perception was that corruption and irregularities were responsible for the increases in time and costs of different mega projects of the government.

About collaboration with Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the Jatiya Sangsad, the ACC chief said it may refer issues of misappropriation of public funds to the corruption watchdog.

Mohammad Muslim Chowdhury, the comptroller and auditor general, said generally it takes at least two years to complete the full cycle of an audit report, starting from audit planning to submission to Parliament.

The PAC only gets a chance to scrutinise the audit report only after it is submitted.

"The time lag hinders the accountability processes. Because when the reports are discussed in the PAC, some of the executives who are supposed to be accountable for their actions might not be in their previous positions. In worst cases, many of them may retire from the service by this time. It makes the process of accountability less effective," he said at the roundtable.

"Moreover, if any fraud or defalcation or any irregular payment is made in the government spending, the irregularity or loss might get irrecoverable due to the long reporting time. If we can introduce real-time auditing or at least in-year auditing,

the issue of delayed audit report will be resolved."

He said by introducing those, the entire process could be completed in a year in the near future.

At the roundtable, Speaker of Parliament Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury said if PAC could work with the CAG office and line ministries oblige the PAC recommendations, corruption would reduce a considerable percentage, which in turn would minimise the ACC's workload.

"For major irregularities, fraudulence and corruption or if necessary, CAG office and PAC refer the cases to the ACC which has the power of answerability and enforcement," she added.

Rustum Ali Faraji, chief of the parliamentary standing committee on PAC, said, the main challenge PAC faced was mgetting the Accounts and Audit Reports on time.

He said fully-automated accounting and reporting system was of utmost necessity for getting audit reports on time.

Due to minimum information in audit reports, PAC sometimes faces problem with identifying proper witnesses in its first sitting on an audit report.