

BIHAR STATE ELECTION

NDA claims victory ahead of final result

AGENCIES

Amid allegation of election fraud, BJP and its ally JD(U) yesterday declared their victory in Bihar state polls ahead of the final result.

The ruling NDA coalition appeared inching towards a simple majority in the 243-member Bihar assembly despite its rival opposition coalition giving it a run for its money. If the present results and trends available hold, the NDA will end up with 124 seats, just the half-way mark required to form the government, and the RJD-led mega coalition with 111.

However, there were 50 seats still undeclared when the ruling NDA coalition announced their victory.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his congratulatory tweet, said people of Bihar have given their "decisive decision for development".

The opposition, led by Tejashwi Yadav's RJD, claimed it won 119 seats but the JDU-BJP government had put pressure on election officials to delay the results. The EC said delay in counting votes were due to coronavirus-related restrictions.

According to results published till 1:00am today, the Rashtriya Janata Dal won 55 seats and was leading in 22. The BJP won 48 seats and was leading in 24. The Janata Dal United won 32 seats and was leading in 11. The Congress won 14 seats and was leading in five and the CPI-ML won nine seats and was leading in three seats.

Despite difference of opinion, BJP leaders in the state indicated that Chief Minister Nitish Kumar will continue in his post if the NDA secures victory.

The election had taken place after a bitter campaign that saw Nitish Kumar battling anti-incumbency, a rebellion by Lok Janshakti Party's Chirag Paswan against his leadership -- seen by many as being backed by BJP. Paswan's rebellion, which has cut into Nitish Kumar's votes, has hugely benefitted the BJP.



Azerbaijanis wave the national flag as they celebrate in the streets of the capital Baku yesterday, after Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed a ceasefire following a string of Azeri victories in fighting over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

PHOTO: AFP

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE WINNERS

WHO WENT TO WAR

Ethiopia's PM Abiy Ahmed -- who won last year's Nobel Peace Prize -- has ordered a military offensive on the northern Tigray region of the country. Ahmed, who won it for ending the 20-year conflict with Eritrea, is far from the first laureate to later wage or support war.



BARACK OBAMA: The first black US president got the prize only nine months after his inauguration in 2009. But far from ending America's foreign wars, as he said he hoped to do, they continued for all eight years of his term, with airstrikes or military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan.



AUNG SAN SUU KYI: The reputation of Myanmar's leader has been left in tatters with the country accused of the ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas and trampling on the rights of other minorities. The 1991 laureate, who won the prize for her heroic resistance to the country's military, now rules in an uneasy power-sharing agreement with them.



HENRY KISSINGER: In 1973, the US secretary of state shared the prize with North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho for negotiating ceasefires that didn't hold. Critics said the award "made political satire obsolete" given Kissinger's role in the carpet bombing of Cambodia and Operation Condor killings to keep pro-US South American dictators in power.



THEODORE ROOSEVELT: The then US president won in 1906 for negotiating an end to the Russo-Japanese war a year earlier. But even at the time, the nomination of the "military mad" leader of the "Rough Riders" volunteer cavalry regiment in the Spanish-American war, was disputed, with Swedish newspapers saying Alfred Nobel would be spinning in his grave.

Ceasefire halts fighting

Russia deploys peacekeepers; celebrations in Azerbaijan, anger in Armenia

REUTERS

Russian peacekeeping troops deployed to the mountain enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh yesterday as part of a ceasefire deal to end six weeks of heavy fighting between Azerbaijan and ethnic Armenian forces.

Under the deal, Azerbaijan will keep territorial gains made in the fighting, including the enclave's second city of Shusha, which Armenians call Shushi. Ethnic Armenian forces must give up control of a slew of other territories between now and Dec 1.

Armenia's defence ministry said military action had halted and calm had been restored in the breakaway territory, which is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but populated and, until recently, fully controlled by ethnic Armenians.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the deal should pave the way for a lasting political settlement of a conflict that has killed thousands, displaced many more, and had threatened to plunge the wider region into war.

Nato member Turkey, Azerbaijan's main supporter and arms supplier, said the deal had secured important gains for its ally and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu hailed it as a "sacred

success".

The ceasefire triggered celebrations in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, where cars and buses sounded their horns in delight and people cheered and waved the Azeri national flag. "This (ceasefire) statement has historic significance. This statement constitutes Armenia's capitulation. This statement puts an end to the years-long occupation," Azeri President Ilham Aliyev said.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

Some Azeris regretted fighting had ended before Azerbaijan controlled all of Nagorno-Karabakh and were wary of the arrival of peacekeepers from Russia, which long dominated the region in Soviet times.

Unrest broke out in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, where crowds stormed and ransacked government buildings overnight, labelling the deal a betrayal. Some demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

Nagorno-Karabakh leader Arayik Harutyunyan said there had been no option but to conclude a peace deal because of the risk of losing the whole enclave to Azerbaijan. Pashinyan said he had

concluded the peace deal under pressure from his own army.

In fighting that flared on Sept. 27, Azerbaijan says it retook much of the land in and around Nagorno-Karabakh that it lost in a 1991-94 war in which about 30,000 people were killed.

The capture of Shusha, or Shushi, appears to have been a turning point. Perched on a mountain top above Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh's biggest city, it gave Azerbaijan's forces a commanding position from which to launch an assault.

Russia, which has a defence pact with Armenia and a military base there, is likely to hail the deal as a sign it is still the main arbiter in the energy-producing South Caucasus, which it sees as its own backyard, despite Turkish attempts to muscle in.

Russian peacekeepers will remain for at least five years, expanding Moscow's military footprint in the region. Putin said they would be deployed along the frontline in Nagorno-Karabakh and in a corridor between the region and Armenia.

Under the agreement, Azerbaijan will gain a road link to an Azeri enclave on the Iranian-Turkish border, something that will give Turkey a land bridge to the rump Azerbaijan.

African bloc wants ceasefire in Ethiopia

REUTERS, Nairobi

The African Union (AU) called for a ceasefire in north Ethiopia where federal troops fighting local Tigrayan forces were reported to have captured an airport yesterday and the region's leader accused Eritrea of sending soldiers across the border.

Hundreds have died in air strikes and fighting in an escalating conflict some fear could slide into civil war given deep animosity between the Tigrayans and PM Abiy Ahmed, who comes from the largest Oromo ethnic group.

Various Tigrayan forces surrendered during the seizure of Humera airport, near the border with Sudan and Eritrea, while the military also captured a road leading from the town to the Sudanese border, the Fana broadcaster reported.

Abiy, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, ordered air strikes and sent troops into Tigray last week after accusing the TPLF of attacking a military base. Tigrayans say Abiy's government oppresses and discriminates against them and behaved autocratically in postponing a national election.

Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a peace deal two years ago, but Afwerki's government remains hostile to the Tigrayan leadership after its role in a devastating 1998-2000 war.

The 44-year-old prime minister is Africa's youngest leader and won his Nobel prize for democratic reforms and for making peace with Eritrea. But his militancy against Tigray has alarmed diplomats and a full-scale war could further damage an economy already reeling from the coronavirus crisis.

US SC unlikely to repeal Obamacare

REUTERS, Washington

US Supreme Court justices yesterday signaled they are unlikely to strike down the entire Obamacare healthcare law in a legal challenge brought by Texas and other Republican-governed states and backed by President Donald Trump's administration.

The justices heard about two hours of arguments by teleconference in an appeal by a coalition of Democratic-governed states including California and New York and the Democratic-led House of Representatives to preserve the Affordable Care Act (ACA), as Obamacare is formally known.

Chief Justice John Roberts and fellow conservative Brett Kavanaugh both asked questions that suggested they were skeptical of Republican arguments that all of Obamacare must fall even if one key provision, known as the individual mandate, is found to be unconstitutional. That provision originally required people to obtain insurance or pay a financial penalty.

"It's hard for you to argue that Congress intended the entire Act to fall if the mandate was struck down," Roberts said, noting that Congress did not repeal the entire law in 2017 when it eliminated the mandate's financial penalty.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A protestor holds a sign outside the US Supreme Court building, as the court justices engage in arguments over the fate of Obamacare laws yesterday.

The case represents the latest Republican legal attack on the 2010 law, which was the signature domestic policy achievement of Democratic former president Barack Obama. The Supreme Court in 2012 and 2015 fended off previous Republican challenges to it. Republicans also have failed in numerous efforts to repeal Obamacare in Congress, though Trump's administration has taken steps to hobble the law.

If Roberts and Kavanaugh in the court's eventual ruling, due by the end of June, join with the court's three liberal justices, it would be enough to keep the vast majority of the law intact. President-elect Joe Biden, who served as vice president under Obama, Biden has criticized Republican efforts to throw out the ACA in the midst of a deadly coronavirus pandemic and hopes to buttress Obamacare after taking office on Jan 20.

Roberts and Kavanaugh appeared to agree that the mandate to obtain insurance can be separated from the rest of the law.

The fact that Congress in 2017 left the rest of the law intact "seems to be compelling evidence," Roberts added.

Kavanaugh, a Trump appointee, added that "this is a fairly straightforward case for severability under our precedents, meaning that we would excise the mandate and leave the rest of the act in place."

The justices - conservatives and liberals alike - also raised questions over whether the Republican challengers had the proper legal standing to bring the lawsuit.

The Supreme Court has a 6-3 conservative majority after the Republican-led Senate last month confirmed Trump's third appointee, Amy Coney Barrett. Most legal experts think the justices will stop short of a seismic ruling striking down Obamacare.

If Obamacare were to be invalidated, up to 20 million Americans could lose medical insurance and insurers could once again refuse to cover people with pre-existing medical conditions. Obamacare expanded public healthcare programs and created marketplaces for private insurance.



WHY CAN'T TRUMP ACCEPT HIS DEFEAT?

With his defeat in the US presidential election, Donald Trump finds himself fighting against being tagged with a label he frequently applies to rivals but which runs completely counter to his own brand: "loser."

The Republican is pursuing legal action in several battleground states, though his lawyers have so far failed to substantiate claims of fraud and observers see the possibility of the courts overturning the result of the vote as vanishingly small.

Yet according to scholars and mental health professionals, the same authoritarian qualities that defined Trump's rise to power and his presidency make it almost impossible for him to digest a graceful concession to Democratic President-elect Joe Biden.

This, they warn, could make the post-election, pre-inauguration period a particularly unstable time for the country.

A growing number of mental health professionals have publicly warned that Trump is a "malignant narcissist." People who have this personality type exhibit narcissism, antisocial personality disorder, paranoia, and sadism.

John Gartner, a Baltimore-based psychologist said he was worried that Trump may attempt to pursue a "Nero decree" or "scorched Earth" strategy as a means to deal with his loss.

For Mary Trump, the president's niece and one of his most strident critics, her uncle's decision to declare himself the winner of the election and accuse his rival of cheating spoke of his desperation at circumstances he wasn't accustomed to.

"Donald has never been in this place before where there's nobody to bail him out, there's nobody to buy him out," the clinical psychologist, told MSNBC.

Trump has built his public persona on the idea of being a winner in every field.

Lawrence Douglas, author of "Will He Go? Trump and the Looming Election Meltdown in 2020," argued there are prudential reasons why remaining in high office is beneficial.

In addition to being hundreds of millions of dollars in debt, he is facing defamation cases by women who have accused him of sexual misconduct and even potential criminal charges stemming from his business practices -- with his immunity ending when he is no longer president.

But beyond that, Trump's refusal to concede helps keep his connection alive with his base, said Douglas. "Even in defeat, this way his brand will remain irresistible to his supporters."

SOURCE: AFP

AFGHAN WOMAN SHOT, BLINDED, FOR GETTING A JOB

REUTERS, Kabul

The last thing 33-year-old Khatera saw were the three men on a motorcycle who attacked her just after she left her job at a police station in Afghanistan's central Ghazni province, shooting at her and stabbing her with a knife in the eyes.

Waking up in hospital, everything was dark.

"I asked the doctors, why I can't see anything? They told me that my eyes are still bandaged because of the wounds. But at that moment, I knew my eyes had been taken from me," she said.

She and local authorities blame the attack on Taliban militants - who deny involvement - and say the assailants acted on a tip-off from her father who vehemently opposed her working outside the home.

For Khatera, the attack caused not just the loss of her sight but the loss of a dream she had battled to achieve - to have an independent career. She joined the Ghazni police as an officer in its crime branch a few months ago.



The rights activists believe a mix of Afghanistan's conservative social norms and an emboldened Taliban gaining influence while the United States withdraws its troops from the country is driving the escalation. Khatera's dream as a child was to work outside the home and after years of trying to convince her father, to no avail, she was able to find support from

her husband.

But her father, she said, did not give up on his opposition.

"Many times, as I went to duty, I saw my father following me ... he started contacting the Taliban in the nearby area and asked them to prevent me from going to my job," she said.

She said that he provided the Taliban with a copy of her ID card to prove she worked for police and that he had called her throughout the day she was attacked, asking for her location.

Ghazni's police confirmed they believed the Taliban were behind the attack and that Khatera's father had been taken into custody. Khatera and her family, including five children, are now hiding out in Kabul, where she is recovering and mourning the career she lost.

She struggles to sleep, jumps when she hears a motorbike and has had to cut off contact with her extended family, including her mother, who blame her for her father's arrest. She hopes desperately that a doctor overseas might somehow be able to partially restore her sight.

UK Lords block Brexit laws

REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Boris Johnson suffered a heavy defeat in parliament's upper chamber on late Monday over proposed laws which would allow him to breach Britain's EU exit treaty.

The Internal Market Bill is designed to protect trade between Britain's four nations after Brexit. It contains clauses ministers say are needed to protect Northern Ireland's delicate status as part of the UK, but would also break international law in a "specific and limited" way.

The House of Lords voted to strip those clauses from the bill in a series of defeats for the ruling Conservative Party.

Far from backing down, however, the government said it would retangle the contentious clauses when the bill returns to the House of Commons, where it had previously passed by 340 votes to 256.

However, the clauses may no longer be needed if talks with the EU on how to make the Irish border work are successful.



Palestinian negotiator Erekat dies

REUTERS

Saeb Erekat, one of the most experienced and high-profile advocates for the Palestinian cause over decades of dispute with Israel, died yesterday after contracting Covid-19. He was 65.

Having sat down with Israeli and US leaders in the 1990s and 2000s, in recent years Erekat was the principal face of a war of words with President Donald Trump's administration over a Middle East plan that envisaged leaving Israel in control of Jewish settlements and large parts of the occupied West Bank.

Erekat, the secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said on Oct. 8 he had contracted the coronavirus. Three years earlier he had undergone a lung transplant in the US that left his immune system compromised.

He died following multiple organ failure after being hospitalised for three weeks in Jerusalem's Hadassah Medical Center.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas declared three days of mourning, calling his death "a big loss for Palestine".

Tzipi Livni, a former Israeli foreign minister, said he had dedicated his life to his people. "Reaching peace is my destiny he used to say. Being sick, he texted me: 'I'm not finished with what I was born to do'. My deepest condolences to the Palestinians and his family. He will be missed," she wrote on Twitter.