



Meloni sworn in as Italy PM

AFP, Rome

Far-right leader Giorgia Meloni was sworn in as Italian prime minister yesterday, to become the first woman to head a government in Italy.

Meloni took the oath before President Sergio Mattarella at the Quirinal Palace in Rome.

Her post-fascist Brothers of Italy party -- Eurosceptic and anti-immigration -- won the September 25 legislative polls but needed outside support to form a government.

Meloni's list of 24 ministers, including six women, revealed a desire to reassure Italy's partners.

Hungarian PM Viktor Orban tweeted: "Congratulations @GiorgiaMeloni on the formation of your government! Big day for the European Right!"



China's President Xi Jinping (R) sits beside Premier Li Keqiang (2L) as former president Hu Jintao (2R) is assisted to leave the closing ceremony of the 20th China's Communist Party's Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Questions swirl as Hu Jintao escorted out of Great Hall

AFP, Beijing

Former Chinese president Hu Jintao was unexpectedly led out of the closing ceremony of the Communist Party Congress in a dramatic moment that disrupted the highly choreographed event.

Hu's departure was left unexplained, and the nation's censors appeared to quickly scrub any recent references to him from the internet.

The frail-looking 79-year-old seemed reluctant to leave the front row of proceedings at Beijing's Great Hall of the People, where he was sitting next to President Xi Jinping.

A steward attempted to take a sitting Hu by the arm before being shaken off. The steward then tried to lift Hu up with both hands from under the armpits.

After an exchange of about a minute, in which Hu spoke briefly with Xi and Premier Li Keqiang, he was led out of the hall.

A seated Xi was filmed holding papers down on the desk as Hu tried to grab them.

Hu patted Li's shoulder as he left with most of his colleagues stared firmly ahead.

China's state media later said the former leader was "not feeling well".

The week-long Congress took place mostly behind closed doors, but Hu's departure occurred shortly after journalists were allowed in to cover the closing ceremony.

"We still don't know what caused Hu's actions, such as whether it was opposition to Xi's power or simply an unfortunately timed senior moment," said Neil Thomas, a senior China analyst at the Eurasia Group consultancy.

"Whether it was deliberate, or he was unwell, the effect is the same. Complete humiliation for the last generation of pre-Xi leadership," tweeted analyst Alex White.



CHINA COMMUNIST PARTY CONGRESS WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

AGENCIES

China's Communist Party wrapped up its twice-a-decade congress on Saturday, approving amendments cementing Xi Jinping's iron grip on the party and revealing a new Central Committee missing two key officials lacking close ties to the leader.

KEY OUTCOMES

Xi is poised to clinch his third five-year stint in charge -- a mandate that would secure his place as the country's most powerful ruler since founding leader Mao Zedong.

The party's new 205 member Central Committee did not include outgoing Premier Li Keqiang or former Guangdong party boss Wang Yang, who had been seen as a potential replacement as premier.

The big reveal -- who will be on seven-member Politburo Standing Committee -- will be on Sunday when Xi walks into a room of journalists at Beijing's Great Hall of the People, followed by the other members in descending order of rank.

Little is known about who will be promoted into which key roles on the PSC or the broader Politburo -- although the number of women is likely to remain very small, and there has never been a woman on the Standing Committee.



CHANGES TO CONSTITUTION

Xi's 'core position': China's Communist Party endorsed Xi's "core position" on the Party Central Committee -- a group of 205 senior officials -- as well as his rarefied status "in the Party as a whole". All party members will have to "acquire a deep understanding" of Xi's unassailable role and work to uphold it, the document says. While the 69-year-old has long been referred to as the "core" of the party, the resolution uses the designation more often and in more reverent terms than the previous charter.

No 'Xi Jinping Thought': Many analysts were waiting to see whether the party would enshrine the term "Xi Jinping Thought" as its guiding doctrine, a move that would have placed Xi on a par with the likes of the country's founding leader Mao Zedong. The lengthier "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" was first woven into the charter in 2017,

and argues that the party must take a commanding role in Chinese society while pushing further reform, national security and internal discipline. The resolution yesterday referred to the ideology by its longer name, indicating that its status had not been significantly elevated. However, it lauded the creed as "the Marxism of contemporary China and of the 21st century". It "embodies the best Chinese culture and ethos of this era", the resolution said.

Taiwan inclusion: For the first time, the party's charter will say explicitly that it opposes Taiwanese independence, according to the resolution. The constitution will be changed to include "statements on... resolutely opposing and deterring separatists seeking 'Taiwan independence'". The existing charter says only that the party will "work continuously to strengthen the unity of all the Chinese people, including compatriots... in Taiwan" as part of efforts to achieve the "reunification of the motherland".

FIGHTING IN SUDAN'S SOUTH Fresh violence kills at least 200

AFP, Khartoum

At least 200 people were killed in two days of ethnic clashes in Sudan's southern Blue Nile state, official media said yesterday, up from an earlier toll of 150.

Clashes in Blue Nile, which borders Ethiopia and South Sudan, broke out last week after reported disputes over land between members of the Hausa people and rival groups, with residents reporting hundreds fleeing intense gunfire and homes and shops set ablaze.

Fighting peaked on Wednesday and Thursday to some of the worst in recent months, prompting the provincial governor to declare a state of emergency on Friday.

"Two hundred people were killed" in three villages in the Wad al-Mahi area, some 500 kilometres south of the capital Khartoum, said a local official said.

Governor Ahmed al-Omda Badi had ordered a "state of emergency... in the whole Blue Nile state for 30 days", according to a Friday provincial decree seen by AFP.

Abbas Moussa, the head of the Wad al-Mahi hospital, told AFP on Thursday that "women, children and elderly" people were among the dead.

The Hausa have mobilised across Sudan, claiming they are discriminated against by tribal law which forbids them to own land in Blue Nile because they were the last group to arrive there. The issue of access to land is highly sensitive in impoverished Sudan, where agriculture and livestock account for 43 percent of employment and 30 percent of GDP, according to UN and World Bank statistics.

Sudan has been grappling with deepening political unrest and a spiralling economic crisis since last year's military coup led by army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

FAIT blacklists Myanmar

AFP, Paris

Myanmar was added on Friday to a global financial blacklist while Russia was sidelined by the international money-laundering watchdog FATF. The move by the Financial Action Task Force puts Myanmar alongside North Korea and Iran as outcasts of the global financial system. Citing a "continued lack of progress" and the fact the majority of the actions Myanmar had promised to take had not been completed more than a year after a deadline, the FATF put the country on the so-called blacklist. Other nations are required to apply enhanced measures to screen transactions with countries on the blacklist to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing. Those measures can act as an impediment to trade and investment.

Japan, Australia ink security pact

AFP, Perth

Australia and Japan agreed to share sensitive intelligence and deepen defence cooperation yesterday, signing a security pact to counter China's military rise. Prime ministers Fumio Kishida and Anthony Albanese inked the accord in the Western Australian city of Perth, revamping a dusty 15-year-old statement drafted when terrorism and weapons proliferation were the overriding concerns.

Kishida said the agreement was a response to an "increasingly harsh strategic environment", without citing China or North Korea by name. Some see the accord as another step toward Japan joining the powerful Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance between Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the United States.



Rally over, demands gone

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Let alone having their demands met, they had not even spoken to the authorities, nor had the government given them any assurance that their legitimate demands would be seen to.

Even more strikingly, the BNP's divisional rally dispersed at 5:45pm and the "raging protests" of the transport owners and workers fell silent by 6:30pm. Things went back to their normal state in less than an hour.

The BNP activists can surely thank their lucky stars for this "coincidence" that at least allowed them a smooth ride back home, a welcome change from the rocky road they had to trudge to reach the rally venue.

In the past, transport strikes dragged on for weeks on end with meeting after meeting taking place between workers, owners, authorities and ministers.

This time, the authorities did not take any steps to sit with those on strike. When the public suffered from this, did they know ahead of

time that the protests would be short-lived?

Interestingly, while the engine-boat owners created a din stating that the oil prices no longer made it feasible for them to carry passengers, the problem seemed to apply only for those trying to make it to Khulna.

However, the crisis caused by the global oil prices seemingly did not affect trips exiting Khulna, with boat-owners merrily providing this service to the public at the existing (supposedly low) fares.

The BNP and the Awami League slung mud at each other for the past two days with the former alleging that these strikes were concerted efforts to foil their rally and the Awami League claiming ignorance.

In response to the BNP's allegation, road minister Obaidul Quader told the press on Friday that the strikes were called by the owners and workers and that the government did not direct anyone to go on strike.

Rather, he insisted, the AL-government provided

all forms of administrative support for the rally to be held.

Also on Friday, Nur Mohammad Mazumder, chairman of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), told journalists that transport operations were suspended in Khulna on political grounds.

"They have not officially approached us with their demands, and the BRTA was not aware of the strike," he said at a programme held in the capital.

A similar situation was created in Mymensingh before the BNP rally on October 15. Bus owners and workers had gone on a sudden strike citing security concerns.

As those concerns did not come to pass centring the Mymensingh rally, the Khulna transport owners came up with new concerns. This time they said they wanted battery-run three-wheelers off the roads.

If Rangpur transport owners go for a strike before October 29, the date for the BNP's next divisional rally, will that be a coincidence too?

BNP won't be allowed to conduct any in December

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been trying to assume power taking the path of conflict. There is no mention of voting in their speeches. There is no mention of independence and Liberation War. Only one thing, they want to oust Sheikh Hasina," he said.

"BNP is holding a rally in Khulna. They [BNP] forcibly use buses and trucks and beat up helpers and conductors instead of paying the fare. That's why they [transport workers] have

already stopped operating buses but the BNP blames the Awami League for it," said the AL leader.

Meanwhile, Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader yesterday said the BNP wants bodies to give a boost to their movement but the government won't allow it. Quader, also the road transport and bridges minister, said the AL would face BNP politically.

"Their intention is to create an incident ... We

will not allow that ... We will not fall into their trap," Quader told reporters after attending a programme at Osmani Memorial Auditorium in Dhaka.

"... the government will not take any responsibility if someone gets killed following the provocations of them [BNP] centring the movement," he said.

While responding to a question, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal yesterday said he was unsure of the exact reason for buses

not running in Khulna.

"As of now, we don't know the exact information as to why the bus services have been stopped. Bus workers or owners had their demands. We don't know if they did it for that reason," the minister said.

Asked about the allegation that BNP leaders and activists were being arrested ahead of their rally, he said that arrests were a regular matter. Anyone who resorts to vandalism or has arrest warrant issued

against them is always taken into custody.

"For the sake of the rally, no one is being arrested ... the metropolitan police commissioner is in charge and he will be able to say well. Nothing has occurred to the best of my knowledge that could make the situation volatile. As far as we know, there will be a rally [in Khulna], and the police are working as usual so that they [BNP] can finish the rally smoothly," the minister added.

Xi solidifies control

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of the closing ceremony.

The frail-looking 79-year-old seemed reluctant to leave the front row where he was sitting next to Xi.

State media reported late Saturday that Hu was "not feeling well" when he was removed.

"Xinhuanet reporter Liu Jiawen has learned that Hu Jintao insisted on attending the closing session... despite the fact that he has been taking time to recuperate recently," Xinhua said on Twitter.

his staff, for his health, accompanied him to a room next to the meeting venue for a rest. Now, he is much better."

Delegates then approved a call obliging all party members to "uphold Comrade Xi Jinping's core position on the Party Central Committee and in the Party as a whole", according to a unanimously passed resolution on changes to the party charter.

Xi is now all but certain to be unveiled as general secretary today, shortly after the first meeting of the new Central Committee.

This will allow Xi to sail through to a third term as China's president, due to be announced during the government's annual legislative sessions in March. The Central Committee of around 200 senior party officials was elected shortly before the closing ceremony.

A list of officials in the group revealed that four out of seven members of the party's Standing Committee -- the apex of power -- would retire.

Among them is Premier Li Keqiang, as well as fellow Politburo Standing

Committee members Wang Yang -- who was touted as a possible successor to Li -- Han Zheng, and Li Zhanshu.

Han and Li Zhanshu were widely expected to step down, having surpassed the informal age limit of 68 for Politburo-level officials -- a requirement not extended to 69-year-old Xi.

Wang and Li Keqiang, both 67, could still have continued in the Standing Committee or 25-member Politburo for another five-year term.

Other high-profile Communist Party top brass absent from the new Central

Committee include high-ranking diplomat Yang Jiechi and economic tsar Liu He.

Analysts were closely watching for whether the party charter would be amended to enshrine "Xi Jinping Thought" as a guiding philosophy, a move that would put Xi on a par with Mao Zedong.

That did not take place, though the resolution did call the creed "the Marxism of contemporary China and of the 21st century", adding that it "embodies the best Chinese culture and ethos of this era".