

17m people vote for new president today

AFP, Colombo

Cash-strapped Sri Lanka goes to polls today to pick its next president in an effective referendum on an unpopular International Monetary Fund austerity plan enacted after the island nation's unprecedented financial crisis.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe urged voters to give him a fresh mandate to continue with austerity measures he says stabilised the economy and ended months of food, fuel and medicine shortages.

"We must continue with reforms to end bankruptcy," Wickremesinghe, 75, said at his final rally in Colombo. "We must build a new economy."

He has restored calm to the streets after civil unrest spurred by the downturn in 2022 saw thousands storm the compound of his predecessor, who promptly fled the country. "Decide if you want to go back to the period of terror, or progress", he added.

But Wickremesinghe's tax hikes and other belt-tightening measures, imposed in line with a \$2.9-billion IMF bailout, have left millions struggling. Experts warn that Sri Lanka's economy is still vulnerable, with payments on the island's \$46 billion foreign debt yet to resume since a 2022 government default.

The election will largely be a referendum on how Wickremesinghe's government has handled the economic crisis and the ensuing modest recovery," the International Crisis Group said this week.

It added that many citizens were suffering "enormous hardship at the same time as Colombo cuts costs and takes other austerity measures perceived by the public as unfair".

Some 17.1 million people are eligible to vote. Over 200,000 officials have been deployed to conduct the election. Results are expected by tomorrow.

There was no

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chairperson's Gulshan office to mark the Janmashtami festival of the Hindu community.

Tarique, who joined the programme via video conferencing from London, recalled several incidents of communal attacks, including the Ramu Buddhist temple attacks in 2012 and the attacks on Hindus in Nasirnagar in 2016.

"Has there been a trial of any incident in the last 15 years? Or has there been a credible investigation into any incident, let alone a trial?" said the BNP acting chairman, pointing the finger at the Awami League government.

He said the "illegal and non-democratic" government tried to create communal issues in a bid to divert public attention from its "misrule and exploitation". "They are still trying to do the same," he said.

"If we all conduct a neutral review of all the attacks on minorities or religious establishments, we'll see that not a single incident occurred directly for religious factors. The real reason behind these attacks was personal interests or ill-political gains by the so-called political party," Tarique said.

He extended his greetings to all members of the country's Hindu community on the Janmashtami festival, which was celebrated on August 26, commemorating the birth of Lord Sri Krishna.

The BNP acting chairman called on all irrespective of creed and view to stay alert so that any evil force cannot foil the aspiration of the student-led mass uprising.

Referring to the incidents of violence that have occurred since ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina fled the country on August 5, Tarique said: "It can undoubtedly be said that democracy is still not free from danger."

In the world now, Tarique said, it is not important who is the majority or the minority. "The most important thing is whether there is justice and the rule of law in a society and a country. We all, irrespective of majority or minority, will be safe if we have these."

Tarique also said every citizen of the country should enjoy political and cultural rights without any obstacles.

50-yr-old man's

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to death before his body was dumped in the bushes."

Contacted, Khilgaon Police Station Officer-in-Charge Daud Hossain said it was learned that the victim went missing after he left his home in Keraniganj around 10:00am on Thursday in search of a job.

SRI LANKA PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2024

Ranil seeks another term as president

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's right-wing President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who seeks re-election in today's ballots, describes himself as the "designated survivor" capable of salvaging the economically troubled nation.

Critics, however, say the 75-year-old six-time prime minister has been the beneficiary of circumstances, rising the ranks via power vacuums left by assassinations and resignations.

That saw him take the top job in 2022, when parliament rescued him from political oblivion and elected him as interim leader, after strongman Gotabaya Rajapaksa was ousted as president by protesters furious at the country's financial collapse.

Wickremesinghe, an ex-journalist turned lawyer, said he had achieved his dream "to be president even for one day". The free-market reformist says he needs another term to push through tough austerity measures to support the \$2.9-billion IMF bailout loan he negotiated.

Sri Lanka secured a deal Thursday with international bondholders to finalise a prolonged debt restructure. Wickremesinghe portrays himself as a veteran leader able to restore the island's economy to a stable footing, after inflation spiked to 70 percent and dire food and fuel shortages.



Premadasa seeks father's role as president

AFP, Colombo

Three decades after his father was assassinated as Sri Lanka's leader, opposition chief Sajith Premadasa is a top contender to take on the role in today's presidential elections.

Premadasa, then a student in Britain, cut short his studies and entered politics after his father, Ranasinghe Premadasa, was killed by a Tamil suicide bomber during a 1993 May Day rally in the capital Colombo.

Today, he will be among the front-runners in an expected three-way race for the South Asian island's top job -- the first vote since the 2022 economic meltdown when protesters ousted then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Premadasa, 57, has spent his life in politics, working his way up to become the deputy leader of the United National Party (UNP).



But he split from the party in 2020, accusing his then-boss Ranil Wickremesinghe -- now his rival as the incumbent president seeking another term -- of being dictatorial.

Both men are ideologically aligned, supporting free-market policies. But Premadasa has pledged to reduce high-income taxes raised by Wickremesinghe to tackle the economic crisis.

Marxist-leaning Dissanayake promises change as his popularity soars

REUTERS, Colombo

Anura Kumara Dissanayake may lack the political lineage of some of his rivals, but his leftist policies to help the poor and stirring speeches have made him a leading candidate in Sri Lanka's presidential election today.

Although Dissanayake's Janatha Vimukthi Peremuna (JVP) party has just three seats in parliament, the 55-year-old candidate has been boosted by his promises of tough anti-corruption measures and bigger welfare schemes.

An opinion poll published this month showed Dissanayake, popularly known as AKD, was leading in voting preferences at 36 percent, followed by main opposition leader Sajith Premadasa and President Ranil Wickremesinghe at third.

Premadasa is the son of former president Ranasinghe Premadasa, which includes his Marxist-leaning JVP party that has traditionally backed stronger state intervention and more closed market economic policies.

He has drawn big crowds at rallies, calling on Sri Lankans to leave behind the suffering of economic crisis that forced president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country in 2022.

Dissanayake's JVP led two failed insurrections in 1971 and 1988 -- against elected governments that led to deaths of thousands. The party has since embraced mainstream politics and Dissanayake, who was not a leader at the time, has not commented on the insurrections in recent years.



WEST BENGAL STATE

Mamata blames dam release for flooding

AFP, Kolkata

A top politician in eastern India yesterday blamed authorities in a neighbouring state for causing a flooding crisis by opening dams after 26 people were killed and 250,000 others were forced to relocate.

Television news images showed rescuers in boats ferrying people to safety in West Bengal state, with a state-run hospital in one village completely inundated.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee told reporters that 26 people had been killed this week, with another 250,000 forced to leave their homes and find shelter.

She accused authorities in neighbouring Jharkhand state of needlessly opening dam sluice gates and releasing the waters that had inundated her state.

"The flooding is man-made," she said, adding she had ordered the border with Jharkhand to be closed for three days in response.

Supriyo Bhattacharya, a member of the ruling coalition in Jharkhand, told AFP that his state had no choice but to ease pressure on the dams.

"Holding back the water could have damaged the dams and led to massive floods in both the states," he said.

Number of Russian deaths in Ukraine hits 70,000

AFP, Warsaw

The BBC and the independent Russian news site Mediapedia said yesterday they had documented the deaths of around 70,000 Russian soldiers since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The toll comes from publicly available information such as official statements, death notices in the media and announcements on social media, as well as tombstones in Russian cemeteries.

"We have identified the names of 70,112 Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine but the actual number is believed to be considerably higher," the BBC said.

"Some families do not share details of their relatives' deaths publicly -- and our analysis does not include names we were unable to check, or the deaths of militia in Russian-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine," the BBC added.

'Exaggerated' historical info to be struck off

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that statements by the ousted prime minister will remain in the textbooks, the member added.

Another member, on the condition of anonymity, said content portraying Hasina in a heroic light, which is deemed unnecessary for textbooks, will be omitted.

"Both Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman will be given respect for their contributions to the nation, and there will no longer be any false or distorted history in the textbooks," he said.

He added that a proposal has already been made to include the contributions of Ziaur Rahman, which had previously been omitted.

Rakhal Raha, a writer and activist involved in the revisions, said, "We have very little time to make major changes, but the government has instructed us to revise any glorified or exaggerated accounts of individuals."

Regarding Mathematics textbooks, Raha said that the revision process has been challenging as experts need to ensure that students transitioning from the new curriculum to the old one do not face inconsistencies in their learning.

"The ICT team is also working on making the content simpler for students," he added.

NCTB Chairman Prof AKM Reazul Hassan said that exaggerated depictions on all textbook covers will

be removed. Instead, the covers may feature content related to national values or emergency services.

"Any content sensitive to social, political, or religious perspectives is being reviewed to ensure historical accuracy and avoid politically controversial material," he said.

When asked if any content on the student-led mass uprising would be included, Prof Reazul said that due to the limited time available, such inclusion is not possible in the current revision. "But we will work on it next time," he added.

On the possibility of a new curriculum in the future, Prof Reazul said, "For now, we are focusing on urgent tasks. Once these are addressed, we will consider new curriculum development."

Asked about challenges in distributing books at the beginning of next year, Prof Reazul said that the tender process for printing the revised textbooks is underway, and students will get the books by the first week of January.

The Hasina-led government had introduced the National Curriculum-2022, which was rolled out in 2023 for classes one, six, and seven, and expanded this year to classes two, three, eight, and nine.

However, the interim government this month decided not to continue with this curriculum, describing it as "not implementable", and opted to revert to the curriculum of 2012.

Polls show

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minus 3.8 percentage points, according to the Times poll.

Separate findings by The Washington Post also found a tight race between the candidates in the state, which is among those along with Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Wisconsin that are seen as likely to determine November's outcome.

Among 1,003 Pennsylvania likely and registered voters surveyed September 12-16, 48 percent said they would vote for Harris while 47 percent said they would cast their ballot for Trump -- a 1-point difference that falls within the poll's margin of error of plus or minus 3.6 percentage points.

The majority of those polled told the Post they were "extremely motivated" to vote and that protecting American democracy was

"extremely important." But voters were split on which candidate would best protect the nation's freedoms, with 48 percent choosing Harris and 45 percent choosing Trump.

The issue looms large as Harris, a former prosecutor and state attorney general, seeks to maintain Democrats' hold on the White House after Biden dropped his re-election bid in July. Trump, who faces four criminal cases, has continued to falsely claim his 2020 election defeat by Biden was due to fraud.

Trump has denied any wrongdoing. The NYT/Inquirer/Siena poll also found US democracy was a major issue for voters along with the economy, abortion and immigration, with preferences for either candidate largely unchanged.

Reuters/Ipsos polling last week showed Harris with a 5 percentage point lead among registered voters, leading Trump 47 percent to 42 percent.

Abducted

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father said Alinur had no relationship with his daughter and he used to harass her on her way to school and home.

"My daughter is a school student. She is still a minor."

The abduction reportedly took place when the schoolgirl was returning home from her coaching centre around 5:00pm on Wednesday.

Her father filed a complaint yesterday morning with Phulbari Police Station accusing Alinur Rahman.

Between the night of September 2 and the morning of September 3, posters were pinned to trees near the girl's house in the village, which read, "The girl of this house will be taken away and converted to a Muslim."

The adviser said that physical altercations over such incidents are unacceptable.

A total of 59 DCs were withdrawn after the fall of the Awami League government on August 5. The interim government made new appointments to these posts. But the appointments of eight new DCs were cancelled later before they took charge.

On September 10, a scuffle broke out at the public administration ministry among officials over the posting of DCs. Some officials allegedly used verbal abuse during the incident.

The following day, around 50-60 deputy secretaries caused a commotion at the ministry.

Following these incidents, the government on September 11 formed a one-member investigation committee, led by MA Akmal Hossain Azad, senior secretary at the Health Services Division. The committee is expected to submit its report by September 23.

Meanwhile, the deputy secretaries were reportedly frustrated with then joint secretary KM Ali Azam over the appointments of DCs. The scuffle took place at his then office at the public administration ministry.

On September 18, Ali Azam was transferred to Sylhet as an additional divisional commissioner. Officials said such a move is considered a "punishment transfer".

An official at the public administration ministry said Ali Azam's transfer to Sylhet is an indication that those involved in the September 10 scuffle will face stringent action.



Activists and medical professionals shout slogans as they take part in a protest march to condemn the rape and murder of a doctor in Kolkata, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Tigers look for respite

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Tasmin had been in good rhythm with the ball, helping the visitors restrict India to 376. He denied Jadeja a century before removing centurion Ashwin in a three-wicket display before Hasan Mahmud got his fifth to become the first Bangladesh bowler to get a wicket in India in Test cricket.

Tasmin produced good bounce in India's second innings to remove skipper Rohit Sharma and make early inroads. Nahid Rana removed Yashasvi Jaiswal and Miraz got the scalps of Virat Kohli as the hosts ended the day at 81 for three.

The Bangladesh bowlers made their case despite being on the field for majority of two days, however, the batters left the game slip, with little room for turning things around as India are well and truly on the driving seat.

Meanwhile, some Palestinians displaced by the Israeli assault on Gaza said they feared their temporary beachside camp would be inundated by high waves.