

Iran Conservatives Prevail In Polls Marked By Low Turnout

Agencies

Tehran: Iran's conservatives will dominate the country's new parliament following an election marked by the lowest voter turnout in decades, according to state media.

Two days after the polls closed, an Al Jazeera tally based on interior ministry results published on Sunday by state media said conservative candidates had secured at least 219 seats in the 290-strong parliament, also known as the Majlis.

With 11 seats set to be contested in a second round in April, the new parliament will also comprise of at least 20 reformists and 35 independents. Five seats are guaranteed for the country's religious minorities: Zoroastrians, Jews, Assyrians, Chaldean Christians and Armenian Christians.

In the capital, Tehran, conservatives won all 30 seats, with former mayor and commander of the

ba's conservative bloc formed a joint list with the ultra-conservative Paydari Front, or the Front of Islamic Revolution Stability. The Front is led by Morteza Agha Tehrani, a scholar and ultra-conservative politician who tends to advocate the principles that led to Iran's 1979 revolution while Ghali-baf has a reputation of being an ambitious technocrat.

Low turnout

According to the Ministry of Interior, voter turnout across the country was about 42.5 percent - the lowest since the revolution. In previous parliamentary elections, nationwide turnout exceeded 60 percent. In Tehran, the turnout stood at just 25 percent, down from previous votes when it averaged 50 percent.

On Sunday, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the country's enemies had tried to "discourage" people from voting by exaggerating the threat of a new coronavirus but added that participation



elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, topping the list.

Before the election, Ghalibaf had been good. The disease has so far claimed the lives of at least eight people in Iran, while more than 40 cases have been confirmed in the country.

Six killed in Israeli air raid on Damascus: Monitor

Agencies

Damascus: Six people have been killed in an Israeli air attack on Damascus, a war monitor said on Monday, as Israel confirmed raids on the Syrian capital as well as on the besieged Gaza Strip.

A statement from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) armed group on Monday said two men, who were members of the group, were killed during the "Zionist bombing in Damascus," which took place

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, later confirmed that four additional pro-Assad, Iran-backed fighters died in the strike.

At least one of the Iran-backed fighters was Syrian, while the nationalities of the others remained unknown, Observatory head Rami Abdulrahman told AFP.

"This cowardly aggression in Damascus was a reflection of the enemy's failure to confront our fighters inside occupied Palestine," the PIJ said.

An AFP correspondent in Damascus heard several strong explosions shortly before midnight local time (22:00 GMT).

The Syrian Observatory said the attacks were "near the Damascus international airport".

The Syrian state news agency SANA said "most of the enemy missiles were shot down before reaching their targets," stressing that "no airport" was struck.

Earlier, SANA said anti-air defences were activated against attacks "in the Damascus area".

Israel said it launched the attack south of Damascus following rocket fire from the Palestinian territory, Gaza.

"In the Adeliyah region, outside of Damascus, an Islamic Jihad compound was struck, used as a hub of Islamic Jihad's activity in Syria," the Israeli army said in a statement, while confirming several other attacks in Gaza.

It is rare for Israel to claim such attacks directly.

Al Jazeera also received independent confirmation about the air raids in Gaza. According to a statement by the Israeli army, "Israeli military planes targeted Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza" including the Khan Yunis headquarters of the group and several storage sites in the southern city of Rafah.

Images received by Al Jazeera showed a ball of fire lighting up the night sky in one Gaza neighbourhood, as thick smoke rose. According to the Palestinian news agency, Maan, four people were injured.

whose jurisdiction includes Israel, the Palestinian territories and Jordan.

It was believed to be the first time the pope, who has often defended both Palestinian rights and Israel's need for security, has spoken in public about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since Trump announced the plan on Jan 28.

The plan would recognise Israel's authority over West Bank Jewish settlements and require Palestinians meet a series of conditions for a state, with its capital in a West Bank village east of Jerusalem.



Malaysia Shocker: PM Mahathir Submits Resignation

Agencies

KUALA LUMPUR : Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has submitted a letter of resignation to the country's king, his office said on Monday, leaving the government in limbo amid talk of forming a new governing coalition.

The fate of Malaysia's ruling coalition had been in doubt after weekend talks between some of its members and opposition groups on forming a new government that would exclude Mahathir's anointed successor Anwar Ibrahim.

The pair had joined forces to win the 2018 election and oust the long-running United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), in an alliance based on a promise that Mahathir would cede power to Anwar.

The tussle between Mahathir, who at 94 is the world's oldest prime minister, and Anwar, 72, has shaped Malaysian politics for decades and tension has persisted.

"The letter has been sent to His Royal Highness the King at 1pm," Mahathir's office said in a statement.

Anwar was due to meet with the king at 0600 GMT. It was not clear if he had the political support to stake a claim

on forming a government.

It was also not immediately clear what the king's next step would be and whether Mahathir could form another government with the support of other parties, including UMNO.

If no grouping had more than the 112 members needed for a parliamentary majority, fresh elections are an option, a person close to Mahathir's party said.

The party, Bersatu, has quit the ruling coalition along with 11 lawmakers from Anwar's PKR party, including Malaysia's Minister of Economic Affairs Mohamed Azmin Ali, they said in separate statements.

"Seems like it will be up for grabs now," a second source said about the possibility of who will form the next government.

"Who can pull in a majority?" Another person, someone who is close to Mahathir, said "people who claim to have majority can go to the king and prove it".

Anwar's press secretary did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Anwar's wife Wan Azizah Ismail is the deputy prime minister of the country and would be the highest figure in the government if Mahathir's resignation is accepted.

"Traitors"

On Sunday, Anwar had accused Mahathir's party and "traitors" in his own PKR party of plotting to form a new government with UMNO.

Sources said Mahathir's party and a faction in Anwar's party met officials from UMNO and Islamist party PAS in efforts to form a new coalition and possibly back Mahathir to serve out a full five-year term as prime minister.

The political turmoil, together with region-wide worries at the spread of the coronavirus, sent Malaysia's currency, bonds and stock market lower.

The ringgit fell 0.8% on the day — its steepest slide in three years — to its lowest level in almost six months.

The main stock market index fell to an eight-year low and bonds fell, forcing yields on 10-year government bonds up 5 basis points, their biggest jump since October.

"It becomes quite hard for Malaysia to bring foreign investors back," Jolynn Kek, head of equity at BOS Wealth Management Malaysia, said, pointing to more political stability and economic growth among its neighbors.

UN chief issues 7-point 'call to action' on human rights

Agencies

Geneva: The head of the United Nations issued a "call to action" on Monday to countries, businesses and all people to help renew and revive human rights across the globe, laying out a seven-point plan amid concerns about climate change, conflict and repression.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres made the appeal at the start of the latest Human Rights Council ses-

sion in Geneva, known as the council's "high-level segment" because it hosts a parade of dignitaries including Libya's prime minister and foreign ministers from countries like Germany, Saudi Arabia and South Korea at the start of the four-week session.

"I have come to the Human Rights Council the fulcrum for international dialogue and cooperation to advance all human rights to launch a Call to Action," Guterres said, speaking in

broad terms and avoiding any reference to individual countries' rights records.

The UN chief said he wanted to speak out now because "human rights are under assault."

His seven-point plan involves linking human rights to issues like sustainable development, crisis prevention, gender equality, the development of the digital age, and freedom of expression and civil society, among other things.

Coronavirus:China death toll reaches 2,592

Virus-hit Wuhan partially lifts curbs on people's movement

Agencies

Beijing: China has partially eased restrictions in coronavirus-hit Wuhan, permitting people who are infected with the virus or stranded to leave for the first time after a month as the death toll climbed to 2,592 while the number of confirmed cases increased to more than 77,000, officials said Monday.

People who are not quarantined and seeking special treatment or stranded in Wuhan can leave in batches, according to the local authority in Wuhan, the city of 11 million, which is the epicentre of

erating two special flights. India is awaiting permission to airlift over 100 more.

A number of countries have evacuated their nationals. Pakistan, which has over 1,000 nationals stuck there, is yet to respond positively to their pleas to evacuate them.

Meanwhile, the death toll climbed to 2,592 with 150 new fatalities while the total number of confirmed cases increased to over 77,000, health officials said on Monday.

The country's National Health Commission (NHC) said it received



the virus. China locked down the city on January 23, followed by the entire Hubei province with over 50 million people. Wuhan is the provincial capital of Hubei. Over 18 cities from the province have been sealed in the lockdown.

No residents were allowed to leave the city since then, including several hundred foreigners, mainly students.

India has evacuated 647 Indians and seven Malaysians by op-

reports of 409 new confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus infection and 150 deaths from 31 provincial-level regions on Sunday.

The overall confirmed cases on the Chinese mainland has reached 77,150 with a total of 2,592 fatalities by the end of Sunday, the NHC said.

Hubei province and its provincial capital Wuhan, the ground zero of the virus, continued to bear the brunt with 149 death while one person died in Hainan Province, it said.

Pompeo orders Iraq's PM to protect US troops

Agencies

Washington: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has urged Mohammad Allawi, Iraq's designated prime minister, to protect American troops even though the Arab country's parliament has voted in favor of expelling them.

During a phone call with Allawi on Sunday, Pompeo "stressed Iraq's obligation to protect US and coalition diplomats, forces and facilities," State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortogus said in a statement.

His remarks are the first substantive US comment on Allawi's appointment as the new prime minister on February 1.

The Iraqi parliament voted on January 5 to oust all US forces following Washington's assassination of Iran's General Qassem Soleimani and Iraq's Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Angered by the Iraqi parliament's decision, Washington threatened to cut off Iraq's access to a US-based key bank account where the Arab country's oil revenues are kept.

President Donald Trump also threatened Iraqis with "sanctions like they've never seen before" if US troops were asked to leave. He

suggested blocking some \$35 billion of Iraqi money "right now sitting in an account" in the United States.

Washington's insistence to stay in Iraq comes amid its attempts to end the presence of Hashd al-Sha'abi fighters, a move that has been condemned as interference in Iraq's internal affairs.



Hashd al-Sha'abi fighters played a major role in the liberation of Daesh-held areas to the south, northeast and north of the Iraqi capital, ever since the terrorists launched an offensive in the country, overrunning vast swathes in lightning attacks.

In December 2019, Washington imposed sanctions targeting leaders of Iraq's Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah groups which operate as part of the country's Popular Mobilization Units, commonly known by the Arabic name Hashd al-Sha'abi.

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Pope gives thumbs-down to Trump's Mideast peace plan

BARI: Pope Francis on Sunday warned against "inequitable solutions" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, saying they would only be a prelude to new crises, in an apparent reference to US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace proposal.

Pope Francis made his comments in the southern Italian port city of Bari, where he travelled to conclude a meeting of bishops from all countries in the Mediterranean basin.

"The Mediterranean region is currently threatened by outbreaks of instability and conflict, both in the Middle East and different countries of North Africa, as well as between various ethnic, religious or confessional groups," Pope Francis said.

"Nor can we overlook the still unresolved conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, with the danger of inequitable solutions and, hence, a prelude to new crises," he said.

The participants included Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the head of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem,



whose jurisdiction includes Israel, the Palestinian territories and Jordan.

It was believed to be the first time the pope, who has often defended both Palestinian rights and Israel's need for security, has spoken in public about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since Trump announced the plan on Jan 28.

The plan would recognise Israel's authority over West Bank Jewish settlements and require Palestinians meet a series of conditions for a state, with its capital in a West Bank village east of Jerusalem.

Walls, mud packs and monkey removal for Trump in India

Ahmedabad: US President Donald Trump makes his first official visit to India on Monday and work has been going on around the clock to spruce things up -- to the annoyance of some locals as well as monkeys.

The photo opportunity highlights of the 36-hour trip include a rally of 100,000 people at the world's largest cricket stadium and watching the sunset with First Lady Melania at the Taj Mahal.

A long wall has been hastily built, along the route in Ahmedabad in western India to the new Sardar Patel Stadium in order, locals believe, to hide a slum, although officials deny it.

Sardar Sarania, a resident of the slum, is disgusted at what he sees as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's attempt to conceal reality.

"So Modi has supposedly made everything good and there's development everywhere, right? But he's hid us behind here," Sara-



nia told AFP.

"We're made invisible. So the gutter we live in, he (Trump) won't see us. That's why they're building this."

Scores of banners and hoardings with pictures of Trump, Modi and Melania Trump have been put up across the city, projecting the "Namaste Trump" rally as a historic event in US-India relations.

The route will be lined with

thousands of people -- well short of the 6-10 million Trump says he has been told will attend -- as well as stages for performers and images of independence hero Mahatma Gandhi.

Ahmedabad officials are also keen to avoid a repeat of when then-US secretary of state John Kerry's cavalcade hit one of India's ubiquitous stray dogs during a 2015 visit.

Mecca Rapper Faces Arrest For Video

Saudi officials have ordered the arrest of a female rapper who appeared in a music video for her song Bint Mecca, or Girl from Mecca, stating that it is offensive to the customs and traditions of the holy city.

In the video, a Saudi woman identified as Ayasel Slay raps about her pride in being from Mecca, home to the holiest site in Islam, the Kaaba.

The video was uploaded to Ayasel's YouTube channel - which has since been removed - last week and featured her rapping in a cafe with a group of smiling children as her backup dancers.

"A Mecca girl is all you need/Don't upset her, she will hurt you," sang Ayasel, describing how a woman from Mecca exceeded all other Saudi women in beauty and strength.

"With her, you can complete the Sunna [get married]/Your life with her will become Paradise," she asserts proudly.

