

India picks BJP backed leader as new president



India's President elect Ram Nath Kovind is greeted during a ceremony after his election
New Delhi

India elected a new president from the bottom of the Hindu caste system yesterday, only the second time since independence a head of state has been chosen from the marginalised group.

Ram Nath Kovind won the largely ceremonial position with more than 65 percent of the vote by members of India's parliament and state assemblies, the election commission said.

The 71-year-old former

lawyer and state governor from the downtrodden Dalit community was nominated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party for the post.

Analysts said the election of Kovind would help Modi tighten his grip on power and accrue political capital by sending an important message to the Dalits, a long-disdained electoral group once known as "untouchables".

The opposition Congress Party also put forward a Dalit candidate, a former

parliamentary speaker Meira Kumar.

But Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party assembled enough electoral college votes to push through its candidate and the outcome was expected.

"Congratulations to Shri Ram Nath Kovind Ji on being elected the President of India! Best wishes for a fruitful and inspiring tenure," Modi wrote on Twitter.

Kovind, in a sobering address after being declared president-elect, said it was an "emotional moment".

"It has been raining in Delhi since morning, and reminds me of my childhood in our ancestral village home, where we siblings used to huddle around the walls to avoid water from the leaking roof when it rained," he said.

"Even today the country will have so many Ram Nath Kovinds working as daily wagers, farmers... sweating for their next meal. I want to tell them that I am going to the 'President House' as their representative." (AFP)

Indian man who played guitar during brain surgery makes recovery



37-year-old patient Abhishek Prasad playing the guitar during a brain surgery,

Bangalore

An Indian man who strummed the guitar as surgeons operated on his brain demonstrated yesterday how the unusual procedure had cured the problem hindering his ability to play.

Abhishek Prasad had been suffering a neurological disorder that caused his fingers to cramp in one hand, preventing him from strumming properly.

The 37-year-old sought treatment from numerous specialists before doctors at Bangalore's Bhagwan Mahaveer Jain Hospital recommended a bizarre procedure to reverse the condition known as "musicians dystonia".

Surgeons drilled into his skull

under anaesthetic and attached an electrode that allowed them to pinpoint where in the brain needed "burning" to cure the rare nerve disorder.

"During this entire surgery Abhishek was fully awake and was playing the guitar, since this problem only comes when he tries to play," Dr Sharan Srinivasan said in a statement.

"This feedback was very important for the doctors to get the exact location of the target to be lesioned."

Prasad described the surreal experience of being conscious on the operating table during the seven-hour procedure as his fingers slowly became more dexterous.

Thai court charges disgraced 'jet-set monk' with rape

Bangkok

A Thai court charged a disgraced former monk yesterday with the rape of an underage girl, fraud and money laundering, after he was extradited from the US.

Thailand is an overwhelmingly Buddhist nation with around 300,000 men in orange robes, but the clergy are beset by high-profile scandals.

Wiraphon Sukphon, 37, was arrested on arrival at Bangkok's main airport late Wednesday from the

US where he established an unofficial Buddhist teaching centre after fleeing Thailand in 2013.

He faces a total of five charges, including raping a minor under 15 years old, which carries a jail term of up to 20 years.

"The Criminal Court has accepted to hear the case against Wiraphon," Worranan Srilum, a spokesman for the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) police unit, said.

Fewer 'good air' days in China despite official efforts

Beijing

Chinese cities had fewer "good air" days in the first half of 2017 compared to the same period last year despite government efforts to curb incessant smog, according to official data.

China has vowed to target coal-burning and vehicle emissions, increase investment in clean energy and punish polluters in a bid to improve the air quality of the world's second largest economy.

But the measures had yet to bear fruit in the six months of the year.

The Ministry of Environmental Protection's monitoring department said

338 cities reported "good" or "excellent" air quality on 74.1 percent of days in the first half, down 2.6 percentage points from last year.

In Beijing and the surrounding area, the proportion of "good air" days dropped 7.1 percentage points from last year to 50.7 percent, while the density of hazardous particulate (PM2.5) climbed 14.3 percent.

Residents of northern China were angered by the air pollution last winter after nearly a ninth of the entire country was smothered in severe smog mid-December.

What makes a dog man's best friend? It's in the genes

Miami

Dogs that are extra friendly share certain genetic similarities with people who are born with a developmental disorder sometimes called the "opposite of autism," which makes them hyper social, researchers said Wednesday.

The report in the journal *Science Advances* pinpointed changes in two genes that are related to extreme social behaviour in dogs, and also in people who are born with Williams-Beuren Syndrome.

People with this condition tend to be highly outgoing, gregarious, empathetic, interested in prolonged eye contact, prone to anxiety and may have mild to moderate learning disabilities and intellectual impairment.

The findings offer new insights into how dogs became domesticated and

split paths from their wolf ancestors years ago.

"It was once thought that during domestication dogs had evolved an advanced form of social cognition that wolves lacked," said co-author Monique Udell, an animal scientist at Oregon State University.

"This new evidence would suggest that dogs instead have a genetic condition that can lead to an exaggerated motivation to seek social contact compared to wolves."

Researchers studied 18 domesticated dogs and 10 captive gray wolves to see how social they were toward people and how they performed on problem-solving tasks.

Given the task of lifting a puzzle box lid to get a sausage treat, the canines were rated on how much they turned to a human in the room for help.