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Thai junta takes shock lead

● There are 51 million eligible voters and more than seven million first-timers aged 18-25

AFP | Bangkok, Thailand

Thailand's ruling junta took an unexpected lead in the country's first election since a 2014 coup with more than 90 percent of ballots counted, putting it on course to return to power at the expense of the kingdom's pro-democracy camp.

Yesterday's election was held under new laws written by the military to smooth its transformation into a civilian government.

While it had set the rules of the game in its favour, analysts had not expected the party to win the popular vote, given mounting anger at junta rule and due to the enduring popularity of Pheu Thai, the party of ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

The army-linked Phalang Pracharat party, which wants junta chief Prayut Chan-O-Cha to return as premier, gained more than 7.3 million votes with 91 percent of ballots tallied, according to the Election Commission -- nearly half a million more than Pheu Thai.

The EC said it would announce full results today, including the numbers of lower house seats won by each party.

The election pitted a royalist junta and its allies against the election-winning machine of billionaire Thaksin -- who was toppled in a 2006 coup -- and featured an unpredictable wave of millions of first-time voters.

There was a high turnout as voters flocked to schoolyards, temples and government offices across the nation, their enthu-



People watch the vote counting process at a polling station in Bangkok



Prayut Chan-O-Cha

siasm fired by years of denied democracy.

The junta has pledged to rescue the kingdom from a decade-long treadmill of protests and coups.

The election commission's announcement late Sunday diminished prospects of a pro-democracy alliance nudging it from power. But still supporters clung on in hope.

"Let's wait until the counting is finished," said Savitree Yodchomchin, 58, outside the Bangkok headquarters of Pheu Thai party, where a party atmosphere earlier among the cluster of supporters had soured.

"I am anxious," said Wipa Ployngam, 53, a supporter of the anti-junta Future Forward party. "I'll stay here all night until everything becomes clear."

Fears of the potential for foul play ricocheted across social media as results came in -- a reflection of the lingering mistrust between rival camps, and

disbelief that a much-pilloried junta could have won a popularity contest against Pheu Thai.

"Thai people come to vote because they want change," said Somkid, 64, a Pheu Thai voter who gave only one name.

"If there is any vote rigging there will be protests."

Royal message

Yesterday's crunch vote was foreshadowed by a cryptic last-minute warning from King Maha Vajiralongkorn to support "good" leaders to prevent "chaos".

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy and the palace is nominally above politics. But the institution retains unassailable powers and is insulated from criticism by a harsh royal defamation law.

The day was framed by the palace statement, which added further intrigue to an election that repeatedly threatened to tip into chaos before a single ballot was cast.

It reiterated comments by late king Bhumibol Adulyadej from 1969 calling for voters to "support good people to govern the society and control the bad people" to prevent them "creating chaos".

While King Maha Vajiralongkorn gave no further clues as to who those "good people" might be, the phrase -- "khon dee" in Thai -- is habitually attached to royalist, establishment politicians.

Another royal command in February torpedoed the candidacy of the king's elder sister Princess Ubolratana for prime minister of a party linked to Thaksin.

That party was dissolved earlier this month, crippling the Shinawatras' electoral strategy.

Thaksin has lived in self-exile since 2008, but he looms large over Sunday's election. His affiliated parties have won every Thai election since 2001, drawing on loyalty from rural and urban poor.



Journalists wait at Phalang Pracharat party headquarters in Bangkok

Syria's return to Arab League not on summit agenda

Cairo, Egypt

The Arab League said yesterday it was not planning to discuss reinstating Syria's membership at a summit later this month, more than eight years after suspending it as the country descended into war.

The pan-Arab bloc, which is set to hold its annual summit in Tunisia on March 31, froze Syria's membership in November 2011 over a bloody government crackdown on protestors.

But several of the bloc's other 21 members have recently renewed ties with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and some have called for Syria to be re-admitted to the league.

"The issue of Syria's return to the Arab League has yet to be listed on the agenda and has not been formally proposed," said the League's spokesman Mahmoud Afifi.

He noted that the "Syrian crisis" however still tops the



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LEAGUE'S SPOKESMAN MAHMOUD AFIFI

agenda, along with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the situation in Yemen and Libya.

Syria's conflict flared in 2011 with anti-government demonstrations that sparked a brutal regime crackdown.

It has since drawn in regional powers, killing 370,000 people and displacing millions.

But the regime, backed by allies Russia and Iran, has since re-conquered much of the territory it had lost to rebels and jihadists, and now controls some two-thirds of the country.

Syria's Kurds, which declared victory over the Islamic State group on Saturday, control much of the oil-rich northeast, which the regime has hinted it may seize back in a military operation.

Earlier this month, Syrian officials attended a meeting of Arab states in neighbouring Jordan for the first time since the country's Arab League membership was suspended.

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Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in December made the first visit of any Arab leader to the Syrian capital since 2011.

The same month, Egypt hosted Syria's national security chief and top Assad aide Ali Mamluk.

The UAE also reopened its Damascus embassy in a major sign of a diplomatic thaw.

Arab states have also slammed US President Donald Trump's call for recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a strategic territory the Jewish state seized from Syria in 1967.

Kazakhstan former PM named leader's top aide

Almaty, Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's new president yesterday appointed a recently dismissed prime minister to head his administration -- a move almost certainly approved by the country's veteran leader, who resigned this week.

The appointment of ex-prime minister Bakytzhan Sagintayev as the new president's chief of staff will bolster the view that Kazakhstan's former president Nursultan Nazarbayev still calls the shots in the oil-rich Central Asian country.

Nazarbayev, who ruled the energy-rich Central Asian nation since before it gained independence with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, stunned the country on Tuesday by announcing his resignation in a televised address.



Bakytzhan Sagintayev

The 78-year-old however retains significant powers thanks to his constitutional status as "Leader of the Nation", lifetime position as chief of the security council and head of the ruling party.

Last month, Nazarbayev dismissed Sagintayev as cabinet chief, citing poor economic performance and analysts suggested his dismissal was aimed at tamping down a simmering protest mood. Sagintayev, 55, previously served as economy minister and deputy chairman of the ruling Nur Otan party.