

UK Local Elections are 'Warm up' Act for June's Brexit Ballot

LONDON - United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May and her pro-hard Brexit Conservatives made significant gains in Thursday's local elections across Britain. The party won more than 550 council seats and swept to victories in mayoral contests in the West Midlands and the Tees Valley.

Behind the raw results of the local elections, however, a potentially even more important back story is playing out that could have key consequences for UK politics. That is, Brexit is driving new positioning by some of the nation's main parties — those with representation in England, Scotland and Wales — which could, ultimately, produce significant,



new anti and pro-European Union (EU) cleavages in the electorate, potentially realigning the political map.

The main beneficiaries — so far — of this emerging development have been the Conservatives who are unifying around the government's Brexit stance. Like May herself, this includes many former Remainers who have now switched sides to back her vision for a hard exit from the EU.

The major shift in positioning by the Tories on the EU has injured, perhaps fatally, the United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip) whose vote collapsed on Thursday. The Ukip lost every council seat it was defending. (AP)

UK Local Elections Point Way to Pain for Labour, Disaster for UKIP at General Election

LONDON - The local election results in much of the UK point to the death of one of the major political parties and a crisis for another, experts said on Saturday.

The results of the local municipal elections come just five weeks before the general election on June 8, surprisingly called by prime minister Theresa May. These local elections were in many parts of the UK outside London.

Across England 2,370 seats were contested in 27 county councils, seven English

unitary authorities and one metropolitan authority.

The Conservatives won 11 English councils and gained 313 councillors. Across the UK, including elections in Wales and Scotland, the Conservatives gained 558 seats, and were the only major party to gain seats.

The main opposition Labour party lost 320 seats nationally, including control of councils in core areas like the north east of England and in Scotland. In ...*(More on P4)...*(22)

Bill to Declare Israel a Jewish State Back on National Agenda

JERUSALEM - Israel's cabinet breathed new life on Sunday into efforts to anchor in law the country's status as a Jewish state, legislation Palestinians have described as an obstacle to peace.

A ministerial committee approved a revised version of a bill first proposed in 2011 that declares the "State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people", its author, Avi Dichter of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party, wrote on Facebook.

The legislation still has to go through further drafting by the Justice Ministry and pass several votes in

parliament in what could be a lengthy process.

But the cabinet-level step — two weeks before a visit by U.S. President Donald Trump — could help Netanyahu shore up relations with far-right members of his government and underpin his campaign to press Palestinians to recognize Israel as the "nation-state" of the Jewish people.

Such acknowledgement has been a key Netanyahu demand for reviving Israeli-Palestinian peace talks that collapsed in 2014 and which Trump has pledged to pursue. Palestinians say accepting ...*(More on P4)...*(23)

German Local Vote is Test for Merkel's Challenger

FRANKFURT, Germany

- Polls are open in northern Germany for a local election that will test the strength of the country's Social Democrats as they try to deny Chancellor Angela Merkel a fourth term. The Social Democrats are trying to hold onto power in Schleswig-Holstein, where they have governed since 2012. A good showing Sunday in the region with a population of 2.8 million would reinforce their prospects for challenging Merkel in the na-

tionwide election in September. Social Democratic governor Torsten Albig is defending a slim majority for his governing coalition with the Greens and the left-leaning SSW party, which represents the region's Danish minority. Polls point to a tight race with Merkel's Christian Democrats. The Social Democrats surged in national polls after Martin Schulz, a former European Parliament president, was nominated as Merkel's challenger, but the party's



ratings have since sagged. The party currently plays second fiddle in a governing coalition headed by Merkel. Schulz has a chance to become chancellor if the

Social Democrats come in ahead of Merkel — either by taking over top spot in the current right-left coalition, or by forming a coalition with other parties. (AP)

Turkish Army Braces to Enter Syria's Idlib: Report

DAMASCUS - The Turkish army is bracing to enter Syria's northwestern province of Idlib as part of the "de-escalation zone" deal reached recently between Russia, Iran and Turkey, pan-Arab Mayadeen TV reported on Saturday, citing "activists."

According to the report, the Turkish side sent a telegram to the armed rebel factions in Idlib, informing them that Turkish forces will enter the border area in Idlib province, near Turkey.

The Turkish side told the rebel factions not to con-

sider the Turkish forces as forces of occupation, and not to resist them, according to the report.

The telegram was reportedly conveyed by a Turkish envoy, who met with leaders of the rebel factions in Idlib, and included "security warning" from the Turkish side to the rebels of not resisting. According to the telegram, "the Turkish forces will temporarily deploy inside the border villages with armored ve-



hicles and infantry forces as a first step" as the areas will be free of any presence of Syria or Russian warplanes. Maintenance workers will also enter the

area to fix the water and electricity network as well as rehabilitating the infrastructure of that province, according to the telegram. (Xinhua)

Macron Favorite as France Votes for New President, Early Turnout Low

PARIS - French people were voting on Sunday in a presidential election pitting a pro-European Union centrist against a eurosceptic, anti-immigration far-rightist, with early figures indicating turnout could be low, but above most recent forecasts.

Opinion polls predict 39-year-old ex-economy minister Emmanuel Macron will win the five-year presidency, seeing off the challenge from National Front leader Marine Le Pen after an election campaign full of scandal and upsets.



Voting ends at 8 pm (1800 GMT) with early projections of the result by pollsters due soon after. The last opinion polls on Friday gave Macron between 61.5 and 63 percent of the vote. Forecasts of the re-

sult proved accurate for the tight first round race between 11 candidates last month.

A victory for Macron, who wants to deregulate the economy and deepen EU ...*(More on P4)...*(24)

Obama to Receive Kennedy Foundation 'Profile in Courage' Award

BOSTON - Former U.S. President Barack Obama is expected in Boston on Sunday to receive the John F. Kennedy Foundation's annual "Profile in Courage Award," honoring his accomplishments during his two terms in office in the face of intense political opposition. "President Kennedy called on a new generation of Americans to give their talents to the service of the country," said Caroline Kennedy, John F. Kennedy's daughter, who will present the award at a ceremony beginning at 8:30 p.m. EDT (0030 GMT). "With exceptional dignity and courage, President Obama has carried that torch into our own time, providing young people of all backgrounds with an example they can emulate," Kennedy said in a statement. She served as U.S. ambassador to Japan during the Obama administration. Previous recipients ...*(More on P4)...*(25)

Syrian Army Advances Despite Deal to Cut Violence, Monitor Says

BEIRUT - The Syrian army seized control of the village of al-Zalakiyah north of Hama on Sunday amid a heavy bombardment, a war monitor reported, despite a deal brokered by Russia, Syria's main foreign backer, to reduce fighting.

Violence has raged in the countryside north of Hama for over a month, since rebels there launched an assault against government forces that was quickly reversed and has now turned into an army push into areas the insurgents gained last year.

Under an agreement that took effect at midnight on Friday, fighting was intended to subside over six months in four "de-escalation zones" where violence between the army and rebels have been most intense.

Fighting also took place in the Qaboun district of Damascus, said the Observatory, a Britain-based group that monitors the war in Syria via a network of contacts around the country.

The deal was agreed during ceasefire talks in Astana in Kazakhstan between the Syrian government's backers Russia and Iran, and the main rebel sponsor Turkey.

Syria's government said it supported the proposal but added that it would continue to fight what it called terrorist groups around the country. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has said previously that all the rebel groups fighting to oust him are terrorists. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Iran Launches Mideast Biggest Energy Exhibition

TEHRAN - Iran kicked off a major energy exhibition in the capital Tehran on Saturday with the participation of 1,500 foreign companies from 37 countries.

The 22nd Iran International Oil, Gas, Refining and Petrochemical Exhibition is aimed at showcasing the country's latest technical achievements and attracting the foreign investments.

Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani said in the opening ceremony that the administration of President Hassan Rouhani has paid serious attention to development of oil and gas fields, according to Iran's Petro Energy Information Network (SHANA).

"The administration of Rouhani has also kept

strong focus on developing joint oilfields which is very important for the country's interests," Larijani was quoted as saying. Iran's petrochemical sector also enjoys great potential which needs to be heeded.

The parliament speaker further voiced Iran's commitment to the nuclear deal reached between the Islamic republic and the six major world powers in July 2015.

The ongoing energy exhibition is considered as the biggest in the Middle East and major companies from China, the Netherlands, France, Britain, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Russia, Japan, South Korea and Australia will attend the event which will continue until May 9, 2017. (Xinhua)

China to Develop Culture into Pillar Industry by 2020

BEIJING - China is planning to develop its cultural industry into a pillar of the national economy by 2020 by upgrading its industrial structure, fostering major brands and boosting consumption, according to a government blueprint made public Sunday.

Issued by the general offices of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the State Council, the outline for the 13th five-year program (2016-2020) on cultural development and reform said the country will help create cultural enterprise groups with core competitiveness and high market share.

"Several of them should strive to be among the top in the industry globally by 2020," it said.

The government will promote both mergers among state-owned cultural enterprises and cross-ownership mergers and acquisitions. Newspapers and magazine resources should also be merged or reorganized and news and publishing organizations with long-term financial and operational difficulties should be shut down or revamped, according to the outline. China vowed

to lower the threshold for private capital to access the sector and said it will boost and guide development of non-public cultural companies and support medium-, small- and micro-sized cultural enterprises that are innovative or specialized.

The country will develop a new Internet-based cultural market, according to the document. State-owned cultural enterprises are encouraged to use the capital market to grow stronger if conditions allow, it said, adding that asset securitization will be promoted in the industry. In addition, efforts will be made to run major cultural assets and equity exchange platforms well, and encourage state-owned cultural assets to conduct transactions and test exchanges of TV dramas on these platforms, said the outline. In an effort to boost cultural consumption, trial programs will be carried out to provide subsidies for the poor to buy cultural products. Support should also be given to build cultural and recreation complexes, art streets, bookstores and small theaters in big and medium-sized cities, according to the outline. (Xinhua)

Pakistan Believes in Peaceful Ties with all Neighbours: FO

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Foreign Office Spokesperson Muhammad, Nafees Zakaria, on Sunday said that Pakistan believes in peaceful relations with all its neighbouring countries. He said effective border management between

Pakistan and Afghanistan is the need of the hour to defeat foes of peace.

In response to a question, the Spokesperson said Pakistan and Iran enjoy a fraternal and cordial relationship. (Monitoring Desk)

Turkmenistan, Germany to Hold Business Talks

ASHGABAT - The next meeting of the joint Turkmenistan-Germany working group will be held on May 11 in Ashgabat, the Turkmen government said in a message.

This issue was considered at a meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan.

President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov noted that the Federal Republic of Germany is traditionally one of the main business partners of Turkmenistan.

He added that the next meeting in Ashgabat will give a new momentum to the intergovernmental dialogue, according to the message.

As of today, Turkmenistan's private sector enterprises with German capital operate in refining industry, construction, trade, services sector, as well as in education and engineering.

German companies make huge contribution to the implementation of Turkmenistan's long-term projects. Such companies as Siemens, Daimler, Claas, Rohde & Schwarz, Dresser-Rand are among those.

Moreover, 167 investment projects and contracts with participation of German capital in a total amount of \$540 million and about 555 million euros are registered in Turkmenistan. (Trend)

China, Belgium Pledge Communication, Cooperation on Ties

BEIJING - Top Chinese political advisor Yu Zhengsheng said on Sunday that China is willing to discuss ideas and ways of cooperation with Belgium to boost win-win development.

Yu, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), made the remarks when meeting with Speaker of the Belgian Senate Christine Defraigne in Beijing. Yu commended the long-term friendship between China and Belgium, saying the development of bilateral relations has entered a fast lane in recent years. The two countries decided to upgrade their relations to ...*(More on P4)...*(26)

Trump Rolls out Red Carpet for Some Unions more than others

WASHINGTON - US President Donald Trump says labor unions have an open door to his White House, but so far, he's holding the door a little more ajar for some organizations than others.

Trump has put out the welcome mat for the nation's construction trades, with whom he's had relationships during decades of building office towers and hotels. Also invited in have been auto, steel and coal workers who backed him during the 2016 election. But there's been no White House invitation for other unions representing the sprawling but shrinking pool of 14.6 million workers who collectively bargain with employers in the labor movement. "You

can tell Congress that America's building trades and its president are very much united," Trump told North America's Building Trade Unions, even as he pledged in the same speech, "America's labor leaders will always find an open door with Donald Trump." But he has not courted all union leaders or advocated for all labor priorities. For example, he's against a \$15-an-hour minimum wage and has let linger a rule expanding overtime pay. Much like President Ronald Reagan did, Trump is not so much pursuing a labor agenda but one that appeals to those who share his "Buy American, Hire American" priorities and happen to be union members. (AP)